

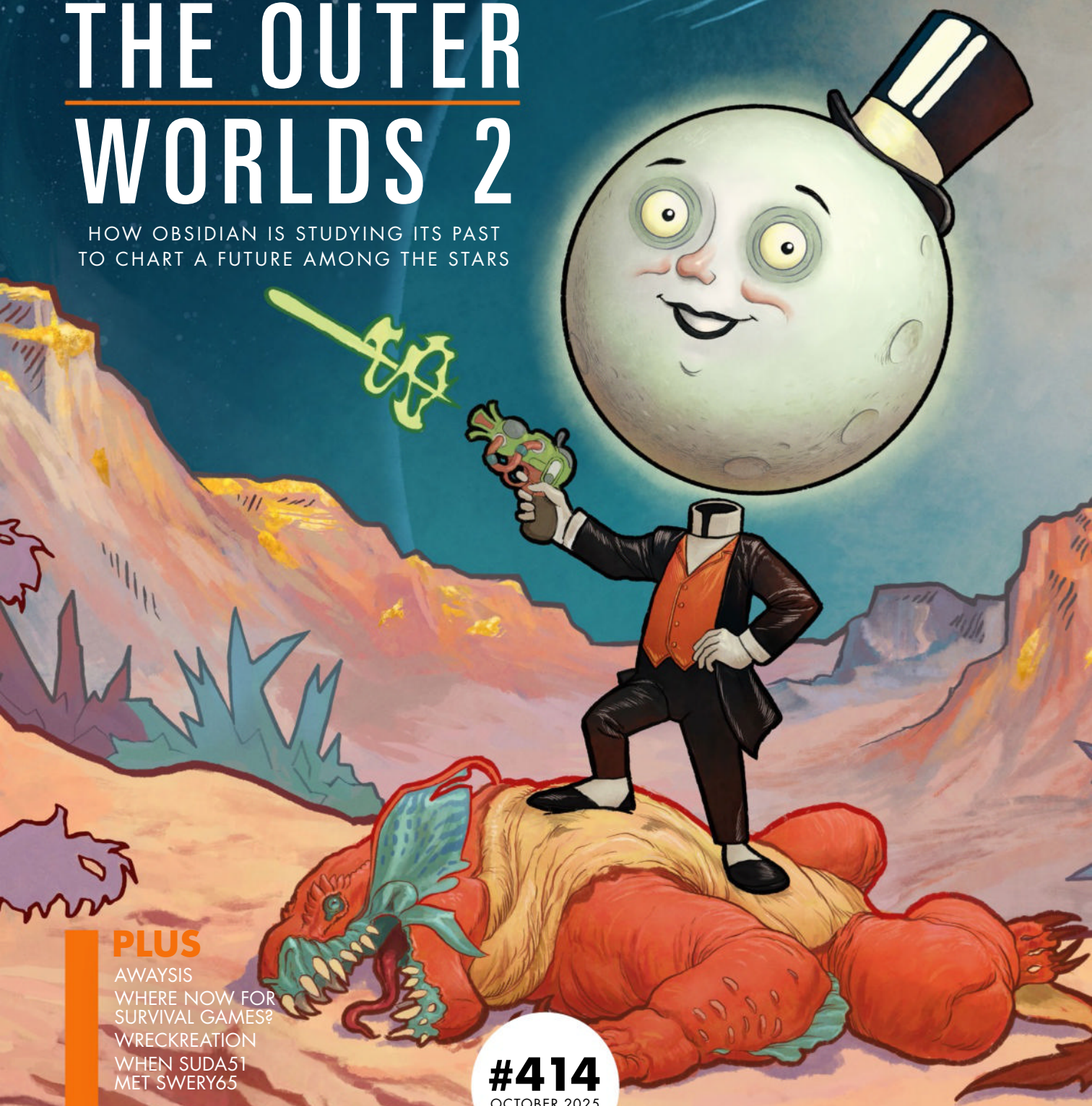
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THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

THE OUTER WORLDS 2

HOW OBSIDIAN IS STUDYING ITS PAST
TO CHART A FUTURE AMONG THE STARS

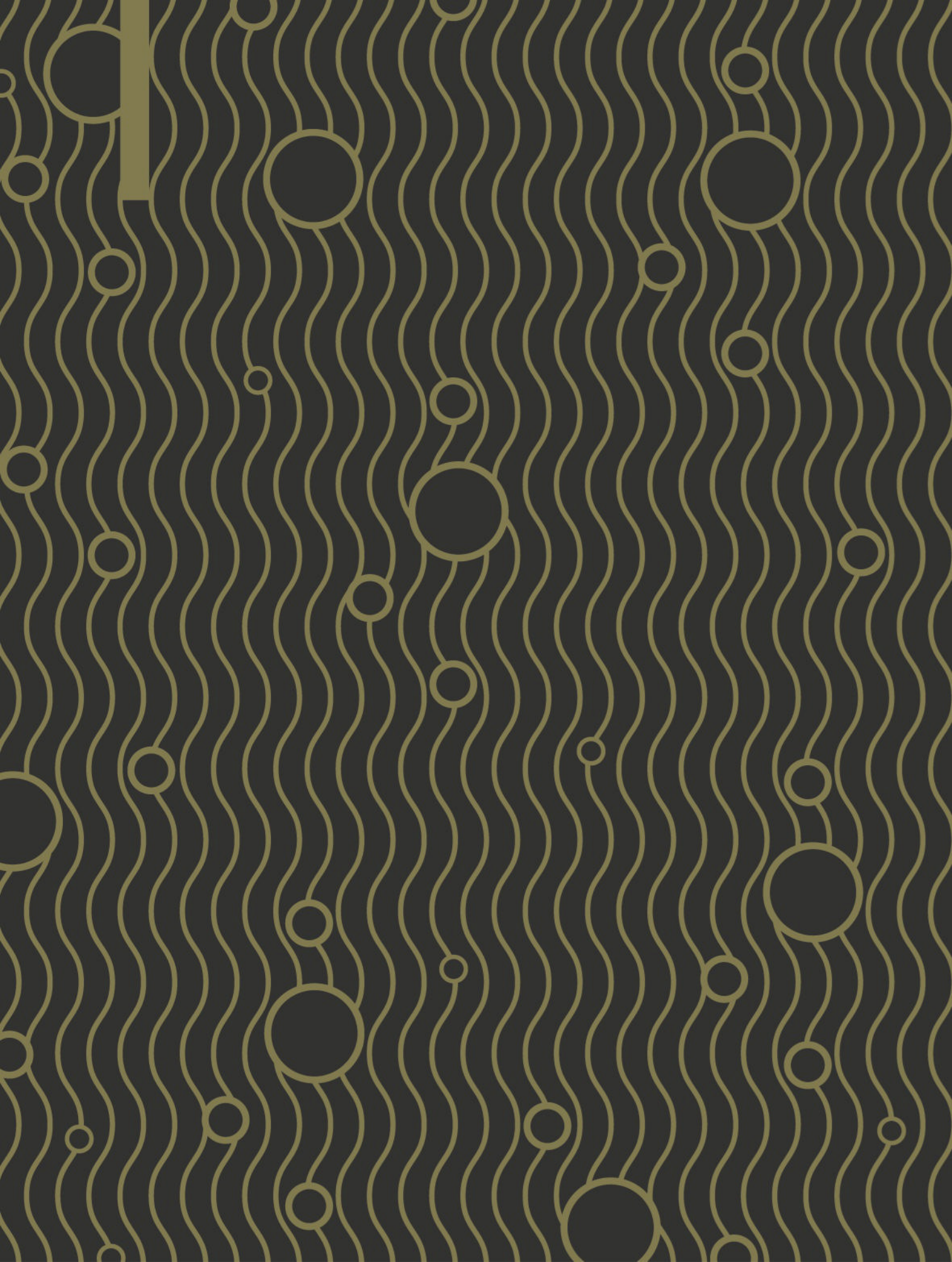


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#414

OCTOBER 2025



A helping of the old days, please, without the crap bits

In his *Dictionary Of Obscure Sorrows*, author John Koenig coined the term *anemoia*, meaning “nostalgia for a time you never experienced”. The concept has since been expanded to include nostalgia for a time that didn’t even exist – feelings that power those slightly weird corners of Facebook that celebrate a black-and-white era in which you could buy a round of drinks with a rusty old penny and still have change left over for fish and chips on the way home. We have seen a variation bleed into videogames in recent years, pixel art used as a direct line to consumers’ nostalgia centres, promising to recreate the wonder of the old days, even though games from back then looked quite unlike these tributes, with their transparency effects, freely rotating sprites and other spangly flourishes. The precise details don’t seem to matter: the *feeling* is the thing.

What’s unusual is that this is no fad. We’d expected the appetite to have waned by now, but it has only grown. The neo-retro market has become a huge, extremely profitable category of its own, and a project such as *Terminator 2D: No Fate*, promising to give us the game of the film we were denied all those years ago, stands alongside triple-A productions on the modern hype train. Meanwhile, tens of millions of people flock to a basic five-second social-media video of a fantasy-RPG concept rendered in pixels – a fine *anemoia* candidate, since it doesn’t even exist as a game, having been created by AI. (No doubt we will see plenty of actual games aping its style, though.) In a way, it’s strange that Nintendo still hasn’t released a mini N64 to follow on from its NES and SNES reissues, but maybe it thinks we simply cannot bear such unvarnished reality in 2025.

This issue’s cover story involves looking to the past, but in this case it’s genuine history, not imagined, and a lived one. Obsidian’s founders have a legacy in RPGs that precedes the company’s formation in 2003, and a specific set of values continues to drive the creation of the studio’s work today. On p54, we discover what that means for *The Outer Worlds 2*.



Exclusive subscriber edition



games

Hype

- 32 **Wreckreation**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 36 **Ambrosia Sky**
PC
- 40 **Dispatch**
PC
- 44 **Awaysis**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 46 **Gothic**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 48 **Frosthaven**
PC
- 50 **Hype roundup**



Explore the iPad
edition of Edge for
additional content

Play

- 100 **Donkey Kong Bananza**
Switch 2
- 104 **Wuchang:
Fallen Feathers**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 108 **Killing Floor 3**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 110 **Eriksholm:
The Stolen Dream**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 112 **Wheel World**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 114 **Ninja Gaiden:
Ragebound**
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 116 **Shadow Labyrinth**
PC, PS5, Switch, Switch 2, Xbox Series
- 118 **The Wandering Village**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 120 **Tales Of The Shire: A
Lord Of The Rings Game**
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 122 **RoboCop: Rogue City –
Unfinished Business**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 123 **The Drifter**
PC



40



100



104



94



#414

sections

OCTOBER 2025

Knowledge

8 New dawn, long shadows

Esports' winter is over, but what are the implications behind its thaw?

12 Epic turnaround

How Omeda has made a success out of *Paragon* with *Predecessor*

14 Sweet spot

A different type of puzzle? That'd require a whole new *Mindset*

16 Skeleton crew

Meet the team decolonising palaeontology through games

18 Carder beats the devil

Poker Roguelike *The Devil's Due* lays its cards upon the table

20 Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls, featuring Ken Levine

54



22 This Month On Edge

The things that caught our eye during the production of E414

Dispatches

24 Dialogue

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

26 Trigger Happy

Reboots, remasters: Steven Poole chews over an industry eating itself

28 The Outer Limits

Is it a detective story? Is it a game? Alex Spencer looks for the answers

Features

54 Retro Futurism

On the launchpad with Obsidian Interactive as it prepares to lift off with *The Outer Worlds 2*

72 Bound By Blood

When Suda51 met fellow horror aficionado Swery65, the result – eventually – was murder

80 Staying Alive

It asks players to manage health, resources and more, but can the survival genre itself keep going?

90 The Making Of...

How Koei Tecmo returned to a Chinese literary classic to create *Dynasty Warriors: Origins*

94 Studio Profile

Getting into the groove with music-game specialist Ichigoichie, home of *Tactichord: Glam Strategy*

124 Time Extend

Scuttling back into Hallownest's crannies for another stab at Team Cherry's beloved *Hollow Knight*

129 The Long Game

What does *The Edge Of Fate* bring to the *Destiny 2* universe?

72



EDGE

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EDITORIAL

Tony Mott editorial director **Jon Bailes** deputy editor **Ed Smith** features editor
Alex Spencer contributing editor **Miriam McDonald** operations editor
Warren Brown group art director **Ryan Robbins** designer

CONTRIBUTORS

Grace Benfell, Alex Chatziannou, Christian Donlan, Niall O'Donoghue, Phil Iwaniuk, Luke Kemp, Rick Lane, Emmanuel Pajon, Steven Poole, Steven Scaife, Chris Schilling, Adam Starkey, Paul Weedon, Alan Wen

SPECIAL THANKS

James Foggin, George Ross

ADVERTISING

Clare Dove UK group commercial director
Kevin Stoddart account director (+44 (0)1225 687455 kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com)

CONTACT US

edge@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS

www.magazinesdirect.com
help@magazinesdirect.com

CIRCULATION

Matthew de Lima circulation manager (+44 (0)330 390 3791)

PRODUCTION

Mark Constance group head of production **Stephen Catherall** head of production **Jo Crosby** senior ad production manager
Jason Hudson digital editions manager **Nola Cokely** production manager

MANAGEMENT

Kevin Addley SVP, consumer division **Matt Pierce** MD, games and entertainment **Tony Mott** editorial director, games
Warren Brown group art director, games and tech **Rodney Dive** global head of design

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Future, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA United Kingdom +44 (0)1225 442244

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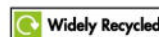
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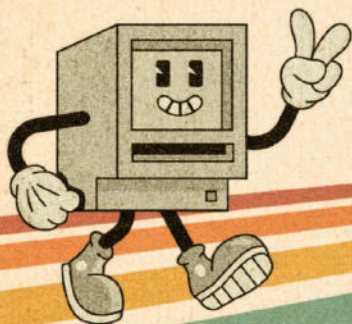


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 **PCSPECIALIST**

New dawn, long shadows

Esports is stable again, but a new benefactor puts devs, teams and fans in a moral quandary

The story within videogames is that esports is on the rise. Or at least that's been the narrative line for the past decade, helped along by gold-rush tales of six-figure crowd sizes and teenagers winning millions of dollars for outplaying other competitors. But after its initial boom, and then the dizzying highs of the COVID era, when everyone was stuck at home and needed something to watch, commercial competitive gaming has been hit with significant setbacks.

Major teams such as 100 Thieves and SoloMid have been downsized. The Overwatch League has collapsed. As big-name partners have successively backed out, the entire esports world has been hit with a realisation: you can't prop all this up on sponsorship deals alone. There have to be other, better ways of making esports make money.

Almost seven million people tuned into the 2024 League Of Legends World Championship final. The majority of those watched digitally, but nearly 15,000 fans showed up to the O2 Arena to see T1 beat Bilibili live. The big downturn in investment and sponsorships, commonly referred to as the 'esports winter' began in 2022. But if EA's head of esports, Monica Dinsmore, is right in predicting an "esports spring" – if, as Dinsmore tells Esports Insider, the industry is "now positioned to grow in a much more mature and strategic way" – bigger and better live events could become esports' next financial lodestone.

Despite being only two years old, the Esports World Cup (a rebranded and evolved version of the Gamers8 tournament) has already bulldozed its

WINTER IS OVER
Arnold Hur, CEO of League Of Legends team Gen.G, says the downturn often labelled the 'esports winter' has officially ended. Game publishers are partnering with teams to create more digital revenue opportunities for players, including the creation of skins based on esports organisations. Salaries have also returned to reasonable levels, and even sponsorship revenue is climbing. "I was really frustrated with how long a lot of these changes, which I felt were necessary to sustainability, took," Hur explains. "I'm still frustrated because I think it should be a lot faster, but I'm starting to see it happen more and more."

way into the annual competitive gaming calendar. It has a \$70m prize pool – the largest in esports history – and offers an investment scheme for teams via its Club Partner Program, whereby accepted organisations receive a six-figure sum from an overall \$20m pot.

Thirty teams joined the Partner Program in 2024. As of this year's World Cup, there are now 40. Potential partners are selected based on their competitive records, their social-media presence, the extent of their engagement with fans and, as outlined on the World Cup's own website, the teams' "strategic plans for activating the global esports audience".

Taken at face value, it's part of a noble effort to help sustain the esports ecosystem, but the Partner Program, the prize pool and the irresistible investment scheme are also designed to make the Esports World Cup the nucleus of the industry. In all but name, the Esports World Cup is exercising a gigantic marketing budget, pulling together games, teams and regions from around the world – especially China and emerging esports hotspots such as India and Latin America – to promote the World Cup as an encompassing, cross-continental brand.

That doesn't mean the Esports World Cup is something entirely cynical.

Arnold Hur, CEO of League Of Legends team Gen.G, says the tournament serves a "really critical role" for publishers that

want to delve into esports without the commitment of a dedicated league. "In an environment where a lot of publishers have decided that it may not make sense for them to own and operate an entire league by themselves, and who want to partner and open up the ecosystem more, they need these kinds of tournaments to actually be part of the competitive scene," he explains.

The lineup of games is also more eclectic than anything else in the industry. Bedrocks such as *League Of Legends* and *Counter-Strike* rub shoulders with

iOS curio *Free Fire* and regional hits such as *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang*, which has accrued the majority of its playerbase in southeast Asia. As part of an attempt to pull in a non-esports audience, there's even a chess tournament featuring Magnus Carlsen and Hikaru Nakamura.

In fact, there's a concerted effort to give the Esports World Cup broader, more 'mainstream' legitimacy. Cristiano Ronaldo serves as the event's global ambassador. Post Malone headlines the opening ceremony. One TV advertisement features Tony Hawk. There's even a five-part documentary series, *Esports World Cup: Level Up*, airing on Amazon Prime.

"We followed a tried-and-tested model by launching a documentary series on a streaming platform and telling the stories," says **Mike McCabe**, COO of the Esport World Cup Foundation (EWCF). "We need to connect to the human

Cristiano Ronaldo is the event's global ambassador. Post Malone headlines the opening ceremony

As Post Malone kicked off proceedings at the opening ceremony, the skies over Riyadh lit up for the Esports World Cup 2025





Gen.G CEO Arnold Hur and Mike McCabe, COO, Esports World Cup Foundation

stories. It can't just be about the competition. We need to bring the games to people in a different way as well. Not every game has the path to become mainstream, but if we build more and more of these stories, we feel confident that we can connect with a host of different gamers in different ways.

"What we've done in the past, and what we've seen with esports, is there have been these high peaks and then deep, deep troughs. There's been a one-year investment and it's like, 'Did it work? No? OK, let's pivot'. And it's really hard to do that. The reason I feel bullish here is because of the multi-year investment."

But, regardless of all the enthusiasm and energy, a moral shadow hangs over the Esports World Cup. It's hosted in and funded by Saudi Arabia, forming part of the National Gaming and esports Strategy initiative that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman says will make Saudi Arabia the "premier global hub for gaming and esports".

The Human Rights Index, published by Varieties Of Democracy, ranks 174 countries based on their provisions of women's rights, LGBT+ rights and other social freedoms. Of those 174 regions, Saudi Arabia is currently ranked 166th. "Courts sentenced people to death following grossly unfair trials," an Amnesty International report on Saudi, published in 2024, explains. "Women continued to face discrimination in law and practice."

The country has been consistently accused of 'sportswashing' – that is, hosting popular athletics and entertainment events as a means of sanitising its image on the world stage. It follows, then, that there is a potential conflict in esports. The financial investment of the World Cup is badly needed, but it is closely associated with Saudi Arabia's leadership, which has a dire record of human-rights abuses. It presents developers, teams and community members with a serious ethical dilemma, where moral concerns clash with pragmatism.

Browser-based geography game *GeoGuessr* withdrew from this year's



Saudi Arabia is aiming to be a "global bridge" for esports, according to EWCF chief operating officer Mike McCabe. "Because 70 per cent of the population identifies as a gamer, it's the perfect place to put it"

Esports World Cup after its community "made it clear that this decision [to participate in the event] does not align with what *GeoGuessr* stands for", according to the game's CEO, Daniel Antell, on the game's official Twitter account. Likewise, despite being offered an "ungodly amount of money", equivalent to more than triple his typical monthly earnings, *League Of Legends* player Christian Rivera (aka 'IWDominate') has also refused to cover the tournament.

In contrast, Riot Games has signed a three-year deal to bring its hero shooter *Valorant* to the Esports World Cup. "We know some of you may not feel great about our decision to partner with the EWC in this way, and we respect that," the company told its fans when the agreement was first announced. "Overall, our goal remains clear: to create meaningful opportunities for pros and teams, deliver unforgettable experiences to players around the world, and carefully navigate the complexities that come with operating on a global stage. We're committed to balancing

these priorities in a way that serves players, teams, and the future of esports."

This struggle between good conscience in esports and good business is likely to continue for years to come. The inaugural Olympic Esports Games will be hosted in Saudi in 2027, and there are already plans to expand the Esports World Cup with additional venues at Qiddiya, the gigantic shopping and

entertainment complex that is scheduled to open in 2026, forming part of the ongoing Saudi Vision reforms project.

But if the World Cup helps esports to become more monetarily sustainable, the game industry will have to balance that financial growth against greater

ethical concerns, and protests from fans, players and developers.

Time will tell how it all pans out. "The Esports World Cup is built with the intention to be an everlasting IP and to be there for the long run," EWCF CEO **Ralf Reichert** says. "You don't do something like this as a temporary project. This is meant to stand the test of time and to create a legacy." ■

"You don't do something like this as a temporary project. This is meant to stand the test of time"

Valorant is a big addition for the second Esports World Cup, but the venues aren't on the same scale as Riot's own tournaments



Beyond the competition are other attractions, such as small museums, merchandise stalls and opportunities to give titles a spin in the Gaming Hall. In the latter, Sony, one of the event's big sponsors, has a Saudi-themed green DualSense on display



Goichi 'G01' Kishida, well known for his success in *Melty Blood* and *Dragon Ball FighterZ*, picks up \$300,000 as the victorious *Fatal Fury: City Of The Wolves* player. It's the largest cash prize ever awarded for an SNK game played competitively

LOCATION,
LOCATION,
LOCATION
Where in the world?



In Riyadh's Boulevard City, home to the Esports World Cup, the playing venues are smaller in size than you might expect. There are four main venues, and over six weeks each showcases tournaments for a variety of games. But in-person seating is surprisingly limited to just hundreds of spectators per venue, contrasting feebly with the stadiums that host the League Of Legends World Championship finals (the O2 Arena, venue for the 2024 final, has a capacity of 20,000). The event is also awkwardly built inside a popular theme park, so the base for Saudi esports organisation Team Falcons sits alongside a haunted-house attraction, a plush stall and a food court with a Chuck E Cheese.

Epic turnaround

2016's *Paragon* was a flop, so why is **Predecessor**, a game built upon its foundations, a hit in 2025?

Cancelled games are meant to stay cancelled. As for fan-based attempts to recreate them? They're meant to be hit with cease-and-desists. Yet in the case of *Paragon*, Epic's short-lived thirdperson MOBA, something unprecedented has happened. *Paragon* was closed down in 2018, but *Predecessor*, a game built from its design, is now celebrating its first birthday. *Predecessor* has a growing audience, 70 developers working on it daily, and – crucially – Epic's blessing. On top of that, this is the first game many members of the team have shipped.

So what went right?

"I'd never really made a game before," laughs **Robbie Singh**, CEO and founder of Omeda Studios, the company behind *Predecessor*. He was at university when he first encountered *Paragon*. Eager to become a content creator on YouTube, he was looking for a game that was "going to be massive", but wasn't massive yet, so that he could make an impact. *Paragon* floored him. Within a few years, Singh had become the most popular content creator for the game, and had met many of the people who would go on to work on *Predecessor* with him.

This meant that when Epic shuttered *Paragon* and announced the free release of the IP and assets to anyone who wanted to use them, Singh, who had just earned a degree in computer science, was well placed to capitalise. "It just kind of happened," he says. In the days after *Paragon*'s demise, he was chatting with

members of his future team, tossing around "crazy ideas" about what might be exciting to add. Steven Meilleur, who would go on to co-found Omeda, suggested they should work on a new version of the design. "We were like, 'How hard could it really be? We'll be done in six months'," Singh laughs. "I think sometimes you need that because the problem is too daunting, and if you know about it already, you might quit."

There were elements in Omeda's favour. Singh was an established figure

on the *Paragon* scene, and had a good relationship with Epic, which would go on to provide a development grant through its MegaGrants scheme. The community was also behind the team. "We were livestreaming development and people would engage with us,"

Singh says. "In 2018, that

was fairly unique." Singh remembers the early days fondly. Everyone had a "real" job, but *Predecessor* was their passion. "We would work during the day, then come online at night, work till the early hours, then go to bed, and then go back to our day jobs," Singh says. And developing the game itself was only part of the task. Alongside the design, the team had to work out everything from publishing on consoles to running and patching a live-service title. "There's been a lot of reading," Singh says.

Following *Predecessor*'s release in August 2024, its audience has grown,

SCALING DOWN Singh puts a lot of *Predecessor*'s success down to the team's relatively small size. "Because our team is so small, we're able to be much scrappier than most other companies," he says. "Because we're a startup, and we can have this really close relationship with our players. And basically, being a private company, I'm the key decision maker, and we can be very nimble and agile." This also means that mistakes can be corrected quickly. "We didn't get everything right when we launched the game," Singh admits. "But because we are very small and can move very fast, we can iterate our way to success."

and the game has become its own thing. "We've tried to stay true to the things that we felt *Paragon* did really well," Singh says, "but there's also room for improvement." He sees *Paragon* as a game whose foundations as a MOBA were still being built. "We've tried to fill out the kind of mainstream roles you would want," he says. "But we actually think we're going to have more success by really focusing on a specific niche of players that might like one particular kind of [unexplored] character too. You find that those [unusual] heroes end up being so loved that your audience grows. Because there's people that really want this thing, and when they find the thing, they never leave your game."

A question lingers. Why has Omeda succeeded where others, including Epic, couldn't? Singh suggests that luck and the team's obsession with the game have played a role. "I'm obsessed, for better or worse. My life literally revolves around this. I don't really do anything else other than this," he says. And as for Epic? "I do think *Paragon* was successful, but it wasn't a *Fortnite*-scale hit overnight." Singh believes that MOBAs need time to grow, which is something a small, focused team can allow for.

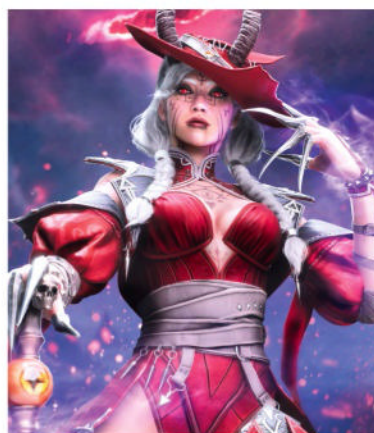
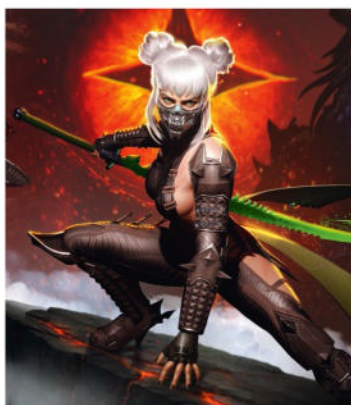
Paragon is far from forgotten, though. To celebrate *Predecessor*'s first birthday, Omeda is bringing in a new level design that is also an old level design. It's *Paragon*'s original game map, which will be coming back as a limited-time game mode in patch 1.7. "We definitely think we're carving out our own identity," Singh says. "But we want to do like a nice little send-off to how we got here." ■



Robbie Singh, CEO and co-founder, Omeda Studios



There's plenty of *Paragon* still visible in *Predecessor*, not least in the approach to combat, which remains suited to a thirdperson perspective



TEAM MATES

From playing together to helping others to play the game



Paragon didn't only give the team a template to build upon; a surprising number of the first-time developers at Omeda Studios were avid players of the game and members of its online fandom. Singh's two co-founders, Andrea Garella and Steven Meilleur, had become his friends through playing *Paragon*, and *Predecessor*'s UI designer and lead designer had similar origins. Then, in June 2021, Steve Superville, *Paragon*'s enviably named creative director, joined Omeda Studios as an advisor, strengthening the link even more. Singh is also proud of the fact that many people in the team play the game competitively.

CENTRE LEFT Omeda's intention is to offer unusual characters that fill 'niches' in the roster. CENTRE RIGHT The map designs combine open areas with a surprising amount of verticality. RIGHT The art approach allows for a range of aesthetics. While there's a desire to appeal to players not being catered to by other games, traditional MOBA roles are also accounted for

Sweet spot

Magicave hopes its **Venn puzzler** will introduce a new category of game

Truly new ideas, in games as elsewhere, are hard to come by. "The design process is often seeing something someone else has built and going, 'That's cool, but wouldn't it be cool if [you changed this]'," says **Ste Curran**, creative director at 'digital toy' developer Magicave. A genuinely original game is "the dream", he admits. "But that's often unattainable."

No wonder Curran remembers the moment he stumbled across his own Holy Grail. "I was looking after my daughter one morning, and she was playing with some Duplo." He began idly sorting the figures by component parts, into columns. "'Here are all the ones with yellow dresses, here are all the ones with brown eyes...' But, of course, these categories overlap." The first realisation: "What I need here isn't columns – it's a Venn diagram."

By the time his daughter was asking for her toys back, Curran had grown attached to his creation. "I needed to quickly record what I'd done, so I just scribbled down the number of figures in each part." And then, the eureka moment: "'Wait. Does this constitute a unique setup? Can I reconstruct from just these instructions?' So I removed the figures, and realised there was just a single solution. 'Oh my god, this is a game'."

And, vitally, one without any real precedent. "There are other Venn-diagram-based puzzle games," Curran says, "but they mostly involve telling you what to sort

into this diagram." The basis of his idea was to present players with the raw materials – a pool of shapes, a collection of interlocking circles, each section displaying the number of things that should go within it – then leave them to figure what goes where, and why. This combines the satisfaction of sorting things with "that base logic of Sudoku", where possibilities are gradually eliminated, before ending up with a Venn diagram you've made yourself. You can experience this for yourself on the facing page, with a bespoke pen-and-paper variant created by Magicave.

"It felt like that thing I'd always wanted: an original idea. Not someone else's to build on top of"

"It felt like that thing I'd always wanted: an original idea," Curran says. "Not someone else's to build on top of, but something entirely new."

After testing a pen-and-paper version, Curran enlisted *Birth* developer Madison Karrh to build a digital prototype – and it's tantalising to imagine the parallel universe where development continued along that path, and we got a version infused with Karrh's distinctive visual style. In reality, though, the result is *Mindset Go*, an app launching on Android and iOS, and playable on the web at mindset.game.

"We wanted to bring it to the largest number of people straight away," Curran says. "That means it had to be instantly accessible, it had to be fast-loading, and it had to be free." *Mindset Go*, then, leans towards the *Candy Crush* model of mobile gaming: cutesy presentation that

CLONE WARS
In addition to *Wordle* and *Sudoku*, a key reference point here is *Threes* – and *2048*, the copy that ate its lunch. "Threes is, in my opinion, a much better game," Curran says. "It's beautifully designed – there's so much love poured into it. But *Threes* wasn't free, and *2048* was." And so *Mindset Go* had to be free, but it's aiming to be the optimal version, too. "While this is an easy game to make, I think it's quite a hard game to make well, in a way that allows people to still be enjoying the game six months, a year, two years later, which I still am. That's not as easy a thing to clone."

suggests approachability, progression hooks that try to dissuade departure, and monetisation strategies.

"Smart casual" is Curran's terminology. "Games that everyone can easily play but leave you feeling good about yourself." The analogy is inevitable: "In that Venn diagram of smart and casual, there's this sweet spot in the middle, filled with a number of really popular recent games." *Wordle* is the key example, of course, and Magicave is hoping *Mindset* might achieve some share of that success, whether in this form or a later iteration.

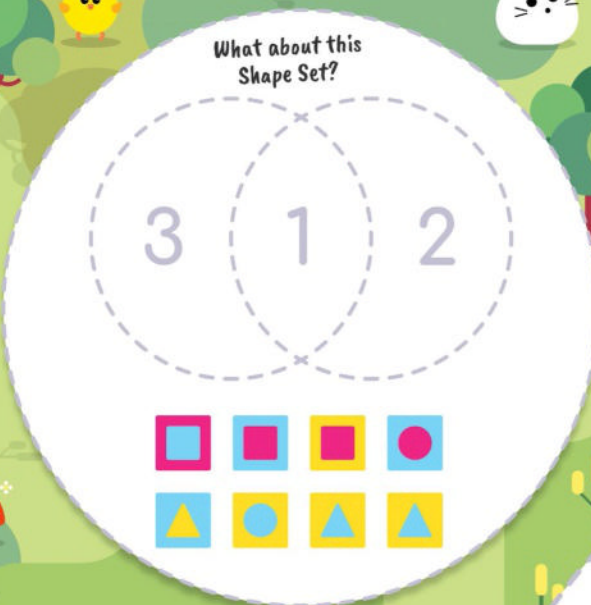
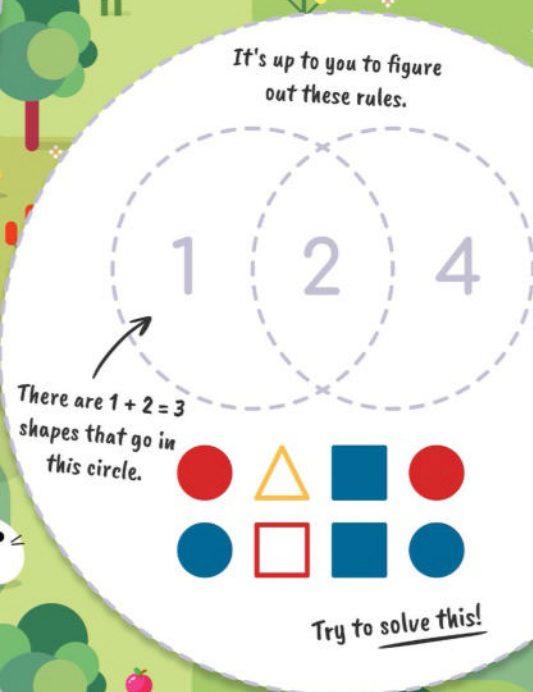
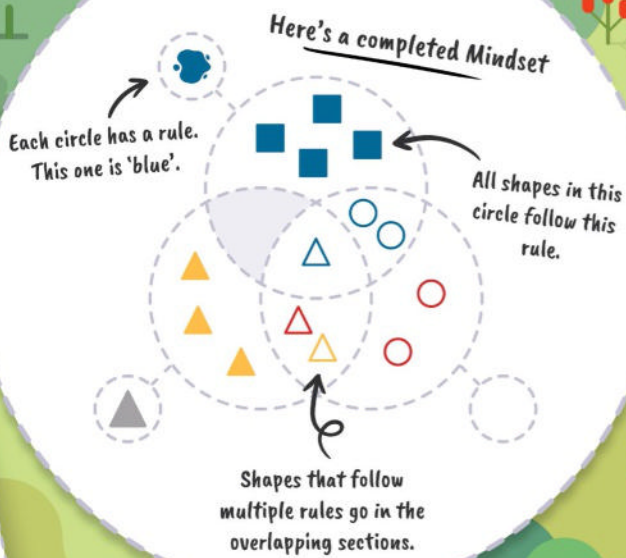
Curran says *Go* is "the first version of this game". And the right one, he believes, to introduce the concept to the widest possible audience. But he's aware that not everyone who would enjoy the core puzzle might be interested in this particular wrapper. "A million people will wish that this bit or that had gone in a different direction. And those versions of the game will come. And, you know, I will build some of them." The core concept is so simple that it can be replicated and remixed – potentially not just by Magicave (see 'Clone wars'). Curran is understandably nervous about copycats but, in a way, they'd be a sign of success.

Because *Go*'s real aim, it seems, is "establishing [a *Mindset*] as a puzzle in its own right". Note the indefinite article. "In the same way as, you know, a crossword is a crossword, a Sudoku is a Sudoku, this is a *Mindset*." Quite the company to be putting your game among, but Curran is adamant: "I don't think I'll ever have a better idea than this. To be able to say that you invented a type of puzzle? That's a designer's dream." ■

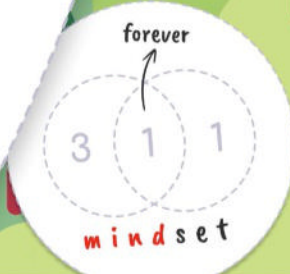


Ste Curran, creative director, Magicave

This bespoke puzzle page is an introduction to Mindset's core puzzle mechanic, and a few of its many shape sets



Can you solve a three-circle Mindset?



Skeleton crew

The game studio on a mission to **decolonise palaeontology**

Science and gaming have always been playmates. From *Alter Ego*, the life sim based on interviews conducted by clinical psychologist Dr Peter Favaro, published by a still-adventurous Activision in 1986, to the simulated gravitational physics of Squad's *Kerbal Space Program*, the medium offers fertile ground for repackaging academic insight into easily digestible forms. But rarely have scholarly concerns and an overt political agenda been so seamlessly grafted onto an instantly recognisable genre as in *Dino Hazard: Chronos Blackout*.

This old-school RPG has been developed by Bone Collectors – a Brazilian husband-and-wife team: Professor **Aline M Ghilardi** and Dr **Tito Aureliano**. It's a project infused with warmth, both for the field of palaeontology and for the 16bit games to which it pays homage. The premise and presentation recall the SNES version of *Jurassic Park*: in the near future, on the island of Ilha Grande, off the Brazilian coast, a dino park run by the Chronos Corporation for big-game hunters experiences severe disruptions. Generators are down, animals escape their enclosures, and security droids are attacking everyone. As the facility's reluctant veterinarian, you need to navigate the initial chaos and assemble a team of misfits to survive.

Chronos Blackout is far from the only project undertaken by Bone Collectors. Known as Colecionadores de Ossos in their native Portuguese, the studio was

founded by Ghilardi during her Master's studies in 2010 as an independent publisher; Aureliano joined later the same year. Their aim is to disseminate science and decolonise palaeontology. "It's defending the right of countries and local communities to preserve, study and interpret their own fossil heritage [while] creating spaces for marginalised voices and empowering them," Ghilardi says.

The most emblematic example of the kind of injustice she's describing is the case of *Ubirajara jubatus*, the first-discovered fossil of which was illegally smuggled from Brazil to Germany and studied without the participation of local researchers. Following the publication of an academic paper describing and classifying the finding in 2020, a protest was led by Ghilardi and Aureliano, gathering momentum on social media and capturing international

attention. The campaign succeeded in returning the fossil to its country of origin in 2023. This, Ghilardi says, was not an isolated incident but another instance of "systemic issues in how paleontological research has been historically conducted".

Bone Collectors has worked across an impressive range of media: comics, documentaries, boardgames, short films, books and collectible toys, assembling a compact transmedia universe. In fact, *Chronos Blackout* is framed as a prequel to Aureliano's novel *Dino Hazard: Hidden Reality*. This versatility is a vital aspect of

CREATIVE ACCOUNTING
Chronos Blackout is a relatively recent release, developed mostly during the COVID-19 lockdowns, but some of Bone Collectors' previous creative work has contributed to science in a more immediate, personal capacity: paying for the couple's degrees. They were living in a Rio favela when Ghilardi discovered her partner's old story drafts. Aureliano recalls how she encouraged him to develop these ideas further as a potential way "to overcome the academic and economic difficulties we were facing. I restarted the draft that would be later called *Realidade Oculta* [Hidden Reality]. She had to travel a lot because of her doctoral project, and I used to call her every day to narrate a newly written chapter." The book was well received in Brazil, and the couple were soon able to proceed with their studies undistracted.

an agenda to spur scientific curiosity and spread knowledge. Ghilardi says that grappling with the demands of each medium has served to expand their reach: "By working across different formats we've been able to reach diverse audiences, including many who wouldn't normally engage with palaeontology or academic science. It made me realise palaeontology doesn't have to live in a lab or a classroom – it can thrive in a game controller or a graphic novel."

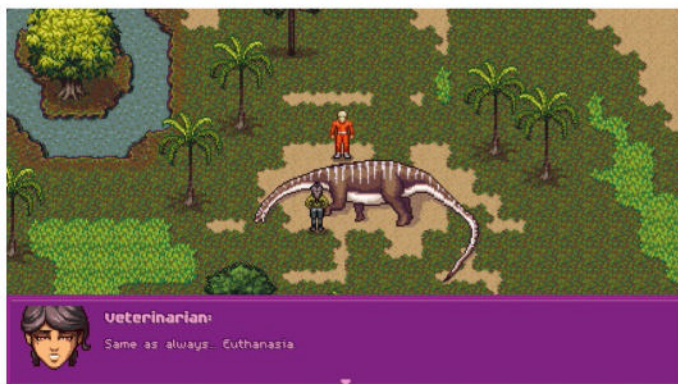
What separates Bone Collectors' output from similar efforts to popularise science is how unobtrusively its agenda melds within the conventions of its chosen medium. *Chronos Blackout* is no evangelising edutainment product but a proper overhead RPG, one in which knowledge is diffused in a genre-appropriate manner through a bestiary called the *DinoDex*. More important than its facts and figures, however, is the outlook of benign curiosity about the natural world it conveys, inconspicuously, through intimately familiar mechanics: while you can always fight the dinosaurs you encounter, there's also the option to study their dietary habits, and to try to befriend them by offering food.

As for the team's next effort, Ghilardi won't give many details but describes it as a love letter to Earth, a project "born from a longing to share that feeling of astonishment – the deep, almost sacred sense of wonder that palaeontology brings". She wants people to experience the emotions the science can deliver: "I hope it will touch people in the same way that fossils touched me and taught me to love nature and our planet." ■

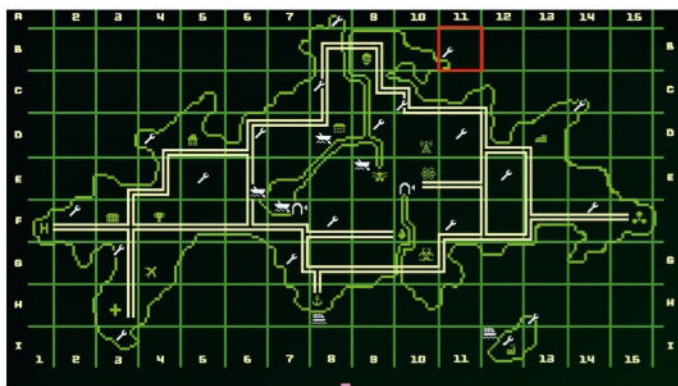
Ghilardi and colleagues excavating the fossils of a megaraptor in Patagonia



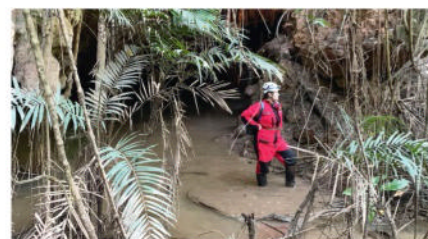
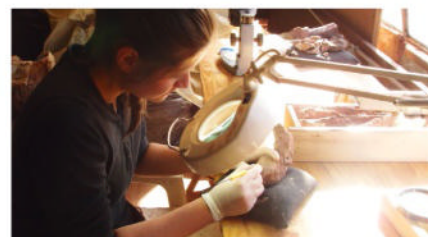
Professor Aline M. Ghilardi and Dr. Tito Aureliano of Brazil's Bone Collectors



ABOVE Along with an explicit scientific agenda, there's a strong anti-corporate sentiment in *Dino Hazard: Chronos Blackout*. The facility's vet, our first playable character, performs her grim duties with a mixture of stoic resignation and seething exasperation from the very beginning



RIGHT The real Ihla Grande currently has environmentally protected status, but in the game it's become a playground for the wealthy



ABOVE Bone Collectors' everyday work lives up to the studio's name, and involves lab duties to clean traces of rock from fossils, the examination of specimens (in this case the massive jaws of a purussaurus super-croc), and field expeditions, including the exploration of caves in the Amazonia region

KNOWLEDGE THE DEVIL'S DUE



This hairy, horned fellow isn't the Devil himself but Bacco, a demon in charge of the gluttony circle of Hell. He'll sip wine during games, dealing damage to you, but that leaves him oblivious to most cheating

CARDER BEATS THE DEVIL

This poker Roguelike offers players a sliver of a chance in Hell – by cheating

The Grim Reaper is famed for playing games against those who seek to delay the inevitable – chess, mostly, but also the odd round of Twister. If it's too late for all that, though, and your only hope is escaping Hell, the game you need to master is Texas hold 'em.

That's the premise of *The Devil's Due*, from Norwegian studio Games People Play, which finds itself in the slightly difficult position of being the *other* poker-based Roguelike deckbuilder. Developer **Jack Kristofferson** is under no illusions. "The market for deckbuilders is, of course, really competitive," he says, "but there is a big audience for those who manage to create something unique."

The Devil's Due has on its side a brilliantly eye-catching visual style inspired by Terry Gilliam's Monty Python animations, as well as a cheating mechanic that gives a fighting chance against your demonic opponents. "But you can't cheat with total impunity," Kristofferson counters. "Every trick you pull builds up the enemy's suspicion, shown as a kind of stormcloud meter." He describes it, intriguingly, as a "more tactical" spin on the traditional mana pool. Expect Games People Play to lay its cards on the table (or rather the desktop) during the middle of next year. ■



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



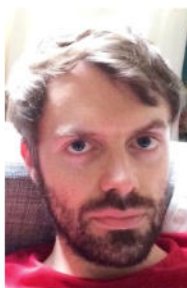
"We should create destinations that players want to return to instead of simply updating existing content."

Live-service overload? Former Avalanche boss **Christofer Sundberg** says the answer lies in "fewer vending machines, more visionaries"



"Essentially, **AI is going to be a cheat code** for people who want to take advantage of it."

For this episode of the great AI debate, we have **Gabe Newell** in the red corner



"Leaving a computer to spit out generic malformed gibberish just **smacks of not giving a shit.**"

And in the blue corner, please put your hands together for **Duke Smoochem** creator **Dan Douglas**

"You buy the game and you get the whole thing. There's no online component. There's no live service..."

Ken Levine confirms *Judas*'s old-fashioned approach, while promising "no diss on any developers" doing it another way



ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Earthion Exa Label
Manufacturer Ancient, exA-Arcadia

The news that exA-Arcadia is exhuming *Tattoo Assassins* in 2025 (see E413) demonstrates that the Japanese manufacturer has a sense of humour, but with *Earthion Exa Label* it's showing its more traditional side, bringing another consumer game into the coin-op world. This time it's from Ancient, the boutique studio founded by Yuzo Koshiro, the veteran Japanese developer renowned for 16bit game music including the soundtracks for *Actraiser* and the *Streets Of Rage* series. A horizontally scrolling shooter in the mould of early-'90s hits such as *Thunder Force III*, *Earthion* is loaded with Koshiro tunes and the requisite quantity of vividly rendered parallax backdrops. The base game will have just arrived on PC by the time you read this, with console editions and the *Exa Label* coin-op version to follow. For the full time-warp experience, though, hold on for the Mega Drive release, due in 2026.



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BOOK

50 Indie Games That Changed The World

bit.ly/50-indies
It's a bold title, and one that needs a strong lineup to match. Fortunately, author Aaron Potter has made sure the content largely fits the bill. Sure, there are notable absences among the 50, relegated to an appendix of honourable mentions, and presumably the main selection was partly driven by interview access. But many of the momentous indie titles of the past 15 or so years are present, explored in depth with insight from their creators plus a sprinkling of prototype shots and concept sketches. As important as the individual stories is the big picture the book hopes to paint. Charting the rebirth of small-team development from the advent of Steam and digital console stores, this is an evidentiary tome underlining that, world-changing or not, indies have changed the gaming landscape.



EXHIBITION

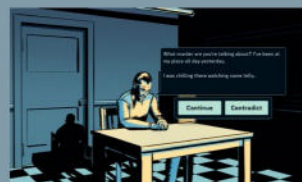
The Story Arcade

bit.ly/story-arcade
Opening for the school summer holidays in the UK, this permanent addition to The Story Museum in Oxford aims to introduce children to the narrative powers of videogames. Dressed in an '80s pixel-art style, the exhibit begins with the simplest of all game stories, Taito's *Space Invaders*, before introducing more recent examples such as *Never Alone*, *Saltsea Chronicles* and *Lost Words: Beyond The Page*. The games can be explored via custom-built arcade machines, with additional activities in the form of dressing up, a Side-Quest trail, boardgames and pixel-themed crafts.

GAME

Let Sleeping Dogs Lie

bit.ly/zzz-dogs
Built for 2025's Mystery Game Jam, this vertical slice of cyberpunk detective work is quietly impressive in aesthetic and design. It all kicks off with a corrupted voice message from a journalist on your PDA. Cross-reference info from that with map locations and recent newspaper stories and you'll locate a crime scene, and there a body, and you must gather and combine clues to create a case report, including details of a potential suspect. The PDA is wonderfully versatile, letting you hack other tech, scan databases and store clues, while this single crime already points to shady corporate dealings beyond the perpetrator. It's a shame that this demo ends just as the plot begins to thicken. If developer Brane decides to take the concept further, we're keen to see just how deep the conspiracy goes.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

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

ACCESSORY

Astro Bot controller holder

bit.ly/astro-stand

This highly accurate effigy of Astro Bot is certainly sturdy. There's a good eight inches of solid plastic here, with a satisfying weight to it. Indeed, it could stand in for a paperweight or doorstop if required, although maker EXG has more tech-related uses in mind. This is the latest addition to its licensed Cable Guys range, based on popular characters and designed not only to live up a desk but to hold a phone or a controller in their welcoming arms. True, it's hardly an essential service, but there is something comforting about Astro keeping your DualSense company (or, if you prefer, Master Chief embracing your Xbox controller) when it's out of your hands.



continue quit

Boost of British

UK Video Games Council established with aim to work with gov to support industry

Fan fares

New website This Week In Videogames commits to ad- and SEO-free model

Fast buck

Summer edition of Games Done Quick raises \$2.4m for Doctors Without Borders

Northern pride

Develop's Star Awards crown *Thank Goodness You're Here!* as best game and original IP

Viral campaign

Tomb Raider composer Peter Connelly jailed for fraudulently acquiring COVID loan

Muddy waters

Ousted heads of Unknown Worlds take action against Krafton for *Subnautica* 2 delay

Doom scrolls

Oblivion Remastered studio Virtuos lays off staff, triggering strike from French employees

Crushing blow

Laid-off King employees are reportedly being replaced by AI tools they helped to create



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DISPATCHES

OCTOBER



Issue 413

Dialogue

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



Staring into the Eye

I have just renewed my **Edge** subscription for another two years, even though it takes me ages to read a single issue cover to cover. Two small children at home tend to get in the way of things like that. Long gone are the days of lengthy gaming sessions like back at university. In fact, even this letter had to be translated by an AI from my native German, because I simply don't have the time. As a result, unread issues pile up, with four currently waiting for me in the stack.

But there is a silver lining to this peculiar reading lifestyle: while most **Edge** readers find themselves waiting forever for the releases teased in your Hype or feature sections, chances are these games have already launched by the time I get around to reading about them! This leads to rather fascinating perspectives, as was the case with *MindsEye* in **E409**.

Just a few days ago, I devoured your in-depth feature on it. What remained was the impression of a promising title from an ambitious team that truly believes in their project and gives it their all. Then came the surprise at release: *MindsEye* seems to be an utter disaster, described by your colleagues as 'soulless', 'generic', and even 'unplayable'. I had been looking forward to it immensely, but now I'll wait for a discount – and hopefully a few patches to fix things up.

What I find myself feeling most, however, is sympathy for the developers rather than the urge to tear them apart. And that, **Edge**, is thanks to you. Your stories, with their focus on the creation process, grant such a personal glimpse into these studios that we see the people behind the product.

Clearly, something went terribly wrong here. I wish Build A Rocket Boy all the best and hope projects like *Everywhere* are not entirely scrapped – or, worse, that the studio is forced to close its doors for good.

Pavel Girard

As anyone who's played *MindsEye* knows, the game clearly wasn't finished at the point of release, with the kind of rough edges you just wouldn't expect from a group carrying experience from the *GTA* series. Perhaps one day we'll find out why this happened.

Art and artificiality

There is no denying the rise of AI and its use in the modern age. From ChatGPT to Microsoft Copilot and Google Gemini, it has slowly ingrained itself into everyday life and work. Online gaming articles slowly become churned-out AI essays, working from the top-trending Reddit topic and attempting to produce something interesting, while

Facebook feeds are filled with everything from baby versions of pop-culture characters to Danny DeVito as Wolverine.

It's quite interesting, then, seeing how the creative attitude towards AI has made itself known in recent games, most notably in *Split/Fiction*, and to a slightly lesser, though no less important, extent in *Death Stranding 2*.

The ethics of AI are muddy at best, with their companies feeding in content pulled from all over the web. Artists' livelihoods are scraped from their feeds, fed into a model which amalgamates it into a sludge of genres and writing styles.

Split/Fiction tackles this in an entertaining albeit very in-your-face way, having the writers take their creativity and work into their own hands to fight against these AI 'overlords' (in a fairly literal sense in game), while tackling their own inner demons along the way. 'The Machine' trawls through their minds, slowly stealing all of their known (and unknown) creative ideas, all to be used by the publisher to pump out auto-generated stories, with no royalties paid to the authors in question (and no disclaimer given to them either). The message is very barely hidden behind the

"I feel sympathy for the developers rather than the urge to tear them apart"



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neon sci-fi lights and lush green fantasy hills: AI-generated literature is simply theft. And writers should not stand for it.

Death Stranding 2's approach is a little more nuanced, but still important. Rather than showing how AI steals all your hard work, it instead chooses a different perspective: showing how AIs can eventually lead to obsolescence. With APAC now used across the UCA, regular old porters are out of a job, their livelihoods given away to the more efficient robot legs. And so they're relegated to looking elsewhere, trekking across continents to hunt for a job. The slow expansion of the Chiral Network may be nice to hear about on paper, but in practice, is Sam not just slowly making himself and other porters even more redundant?

Ultimately, while the approach of these storylines are very different, they both reach the same conclusion: AI is efficient, but it only walks the paths paved by human ingenuity and creativity. Without the human creativity of the main characters in *Split/Fiction*, we wouldn't have the huge, sprawling variety of unique levels. And without the human porters trekking across the world, those paths taken by the APAC porters would not exist, the roads no longer paved for them to take advantage of.

Luke Thompson

It's difficult to recall any piece of technology as controversial as generative AI. On the one hand, as you say, it has become embedded in our everyday lives, while luminaries such as Tim Sweeney, John Carmack and Gabe Newell endorse its value in an engineering sense. None of this, though, can prevent harm to creators, or indeed stop the slop.

Out of control

Over the past few months, I've been playing through *Red Dead Redemption 2* for the first time. At the same time, my wife and I are expecting our first child this September.

I'm always drawn to emotional, character-driven experiences in videogames and the

unique narrative devices they possess relative to movies, television and books. One device I've always been particularly fascinated with is what I might call embodied storytelling. In movies and television, experiences are strictly scripted – you have no unstructured time with the characters. In books, there's greater narrative length, but the principle is still the same – the author is in control every page.

Videogames break this mould, albeit slightly. Yes, it's still scripted. But in games like *RDR2* and *The Last Of Us*, there is a more subtle storytelling taking place. It's in the small moments, often during traversal, when Arthur Morgan calms or encourages his horse, or when Ellie tells another joke to Joel while walking through a wasteland. You inhabit their quirks, rhythms, minutiae of daily living – their unscripted moments.

Mixed with player autonomy to freely move and act in infinite ways, the cumulative effect of these tiny interactions is huge. It's an embodied experience unlike any other medium that allows you to exist as that character for dozens of hours. But they're still bounded experiences: Naughty Dog and Rockstar still control the outcome, no matter what I do.

I can't help thinking that this, in essence, will be parenthood. Not the big milestones, but the slow accumulation of unscripted moments – learning how my child responds to my voice, developing our rhythms of daily life. Like those games, it's a bounded experience where the major narrative beats are out of my control, but the real story happens in the spaces between – in how we exist together through ordinary time.

Or, if this is too heady, maybe a more simple observation as we comb through dozens of stroller options: parenthood is just another walking simulator.

Timothy Michalak

And a particularly expensive walking simulator, of course. A free Edge T-shirt will surely fix all impending budget woes.

Growing with games

Every time I read something in *Edge* related to time management, growing up and having kids, I think to myself, 'I'm glad I'm still a kid! I've subscribed to this magazine since I was 18, which I assume still places me in the lower age threshold of readers. However, I just turned 20, so I guess growing up has happened without me realising it.

Although I write, analyse and discuss videogames as much as I can to connect with them on a deeper level, I still consider games a childlike pastime. But, like a cold plunge on my mortal existence, *Deltarune*, of all modern games, is what has led me to realise that I'm finally growing up.

I remember playing *Undertale* back in elementary school. It's likely a huge reason why my friends and I are so invested in videogames to begin with. But unlike *Undertale*, which was played in our childhood bedrooms and living rooms, *Deltarune* chapters three and four have been released as we surf through dorms and overpriced apartments, with sparse time for actually playing.

As I sit in my childhood bedroom over summer break playing through *Deltarune*'s latest chapters, chuckling at Toby Fox's classic humour like it's 2015 again, I think I've come to realise that growing up is more than simply changing. It's a bit of a miracle that I can still, as a 20-year-old person, enjoy these things to a similar, if not greater, extent than I did back when I was ten.

It exhilarates me to imagine the dozen other videogames I'll play in the next few years that'll shock my emotional core even slightly like this one has. Thank you, Toby Fox, for reminding me that videogames can grow alongside me, while staying true to their roots, and thank you, *Edge*, for encouraging this 20-year-old zoomer to read a few times a month.

Dashiell Reynaldo

This feels like a gauntlet being laid down: do we have any readers younger than 20? ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Reboots used to be events, and announced as such. Now we're just stuck in an endless reboot loop. Who's Batman this year? Ben Affleck? R-Patz? Derek Zoolander? Doesn't matter: you'll sit through yet another slightly different retelling of Bruce Wayne's origin story and everyone will coo and drool over how unprecedentedly "dark" and "moody" the new director has made it, compared to the cartoonish frivolity and lightheartedness of Zack Snyder's efforts.

Reboots, remakes and 'remasters' litter the field of videogames, too, with all the various *Dooms*, *Wolfensteins*, *Tomb Raiders*, *Princes Of Persia*, *Calls Of Duty* and whatnot. (The idea of remastering is taken from the final stage of music production: mastering sets the final tonal balance and loudness. Lots of classic 1970s rock music was horribly remastered in the 2000s by cranking up the treble so the hi-hats became really piercing. In videogame terms, that would be like making the cars of a driving game 50 per cent bigger but keeping the roads the same.) In a similar way, Disney keeps making live-action remakes of its popular animated movies, such as *Lilo & Stich* or *How To Train Your Dragon*, making certain critics literally cry at their childhood favourites being ruined (although I quite enjoyed both new versions). Why sweat your IP once when you can do it several times?

Now is the time to confess I will be doing my bit to encourage this insanity because I simply cannot wait to play the forthcoming *Metal Gear Solid Delta*, even though I won't be playing it in the bizarrely wrong way shown in the latest (at the time of this writing) teaser trailer, which features Snake slowly walking towards a bunch of enemy guys in full view of them and blasting at them with a shotgun, though to be fair that looks like a very blasty weapon. Yes, I played *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* all those years ago and I'm going to play it again in its fancy new clothes. And I want to play it much more than I want to play almost all other new games that feature



What videogame gun has been more ridiculously satisfying than the Farsight XR-20? No videogame gun

men with clenched jaws and clenched guns. I'm furious, too, that the reboot of *Perfect Dark* was cancelled as part of the latest round of wanton job destruction at Microsoft. What videogame gun has been more ridiculously satisfying than the Farsight XR-20? No videogame gun.

Of course the game industry, like the film industry, has long suffered from sequelitis, and the lines between a sequel and a reboot can often seem blurred. A videogame sequel, in particular, is often just an expanded and polished version of the original, another stab at fulfilling the developers' vision. It would be

wrong, for example, to say that *Death Stranding 2* is 'just' a reboot of *Death Stranding*, but – like many sequels – it is in a way like a new model version of a popular car, one that fixes annoyances and rides more smoothly, while seeking to provide a very similar overall experience.

So, yes, I understand the attraction, but things are getting a little ridiculous. What if writers started doing the same thing? Lee Child could issue 'remastered' versions of his Jack Reacher novels with ten per cent more adjectives and more fan-service scenes of Reacher getting naked for no reason. Actually, something similar does already happen, when classic literature is rewritten to preserve modern 'sensitivities': Puffin Books controversially did this to the works of Roald Dahl in 2023, carefully excising every use of the word 'fat'.

Long ago, a band warned in its very name that pop would eat itself. Now pop – as in all popular culture – is doing just that, like the man in a particularly grim short story by Stephen King entitled *Survivor Type*. In this grotesquely fascinating fable, a doctor is shipwrecked on a desert island with no food but a good supply of heroin. He survives by slowly cutting off bits of himself – having anaesthetised himself with the drug – and eating them, starting with his feet and working his way up.

It's rather clear in this brilliantly horrible story that such a mode of survival, though ingenious, is not, as we would say these days, sustainable. Eventually the person attempting such a feat will remove so much of himself as to cause fatal debility. Is this what happens to culture too? Is it possible to imagine a world so crowded with remakes, reboots and remasters that executives – if not creative people themselves – entirely forget how to imagine something new? Head on over to Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg's infinite rage-scrolling machines to find out!

Steven Poole is a writer, composer and author whose books include *Trigger Happy 2.0*, *Unspeaking*, and *Rethinking*.



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ALEX SPENCER

The Outer Limits

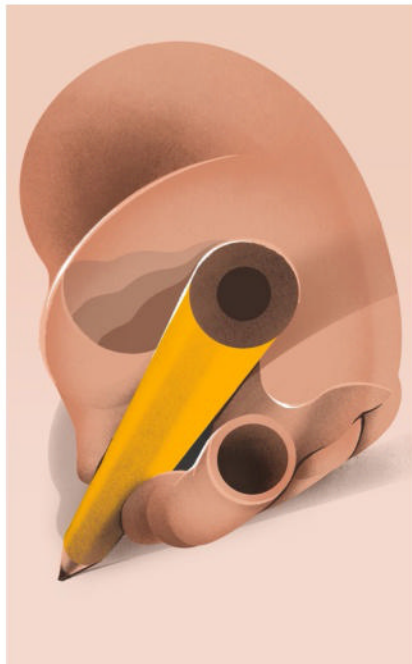
Journeys to the farthest reaches of interactive entertainment

The body is a splatter on the sun-hardened ground, staining both the courtyard and reputation of the Elysium wellness retreat. It once belonged to Harry Kennedy, a local property developer whose pride came before a fall – and, before that, a gardening fork to the chest. If you have no interest in finding Harry’s killer, turn to p30. If you do... well, I suppose you’d need to buy *Can You Solve The Murder?* But first, read on.

This book is the latest from Antony Johnston, writer of both videogames (*Resident Evil: Village*, *Dead Space*) and murder-mystery novels and comics (*The Dog Sitter Detective*, *The Fuse*). For such a veteran of the genre – Johnston is a former vice-chair of the UK’s Crime Writers’ Association – the mystery within is surprisingly straightforward. The most unusual detail of the murder is the red rose discovered inside Harry’s mouth, and the cast of police detective and suspects are all fairly archetypal in their characterisation. But perhaps that’s necessary for a story seeking to reinvent the form in other ways.

Can You Solve The Murder? is billed as an “interactive crime novel”. Having argued in a previous column that detective stories are inherently an interactive form, you can probably imagine my glee at seeing those words on the cover. As for what they actually mean: it’s a mashup of a traditional detective story with the kinds of gamebooks nodded to above – you know, broken up into sections, all ending in a choice that directs you to the next, so you’re constantly flicking back and forth through its pages.

The two make for an interesting mix. You may well be familiar with the old habit of holding one finger against the previous page, flicking ahead to see what might wait around the next corner – but that becomes much harder in a detective story, where failure is less immediate than falling into a spike pit or being clubbed over the head by an orc. You might follow a bad lead, or get swept up in a red herring, but not realise it until much later



I’m always happy when a game encourages notetaking, turning transitory experiences into something physical

on, at which point only the most committed cheaters would backtrack.

Equally, all this skimming back and forth does mean there’s a risk of accidentally spotting clues. My eye is inexorably drawn to a line of dialogue about secret lovers and, elsewhere, a mention of a particular suspect being led away in handcuffs. But any fear of spoilers is quelled by the much greater number of times I spy “THE END” closing off a section. I wonder if the latter’s all-caps prominence is intentional – a reminder that there’s more than one way this could go, more than one suspect you could finger for arrest.

That outcome is, ultimately, another ‘turn to’ choice at the story’s end, when all its possible branches converge in the inevitable parlour scene. But the decision you make – and how you get there – is informed by the clues gathered along the way, tracked by a smart variant of the classic inventory system. At the end of a section, after you’ve investigated a crime scene or interviewed a suspect, you might be asked to jot down a Clue Number, which might then unlock a further route later on. It’s impossible not to feel smug every time I read “If you have J5 written in your notebook, turn to 23” or whatever, knowing I’ve got that one in the bag. And if any figure in fiction should be smug, it’s the detective.

Can You Solve The Murder? does a wonderful job of putting you in this role – and its single greatest asset in this regard might be the insistence that you make notes as you go. As well as the clue notations, there are coded messages to be written down and (if you fancy) deciphered by hand. I’m always happy when a game encourages notetaking – that fondness for turning transitory experiences into something physical and permanent. But here it’s a prompt for roleplay, because the notepad is an essential part of the detective’s arsenal.

I take this prompt and run with it, writing down everything from the estimated time of death to observations on each suspect. (“Out of loop re: financial problems?” reads one note – I told you this was a standard-issue mystery.) Not that this effort really pays off, in terms of justice being served. I accuse the wrong person and rewind, keeping a finger on the page containing the parlour scene, not once but four times before landing on the actual killer. I have some quibbles with the solution, but what’s really important is that, for a few hours there, I got to feel like a detective on the case. (I never specified it had to be a *good* detective.)

Do you have a crime in need of solving? If so, do not turn to Edge contributing editor Alex Spencer for any kind of help.

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THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

32 Wreckreation
PC, PS5, Xbox Series

36 Ambrosia Sky
PC

40 Dispatch
PC

44 Awaysis
PC, PS5, Xbox Series

46 Gothic
PC, PS5, Xbox Series

48 Frosthaven
PC

50 Ghost Of Yotei
PS5

**50 Daemon X Machina:
Titanic Scion**
PC, PS5, Switch 2, Xbox Series

50 Rhythm Of Resistance
PC

50 Sleep Awake
PC, PS5, Xbox Series

50 Pera Coda
PC



Explore the iPad
edition of Edge for
extra Hype content

Fun, anyone?

In its new game, *Awaysis*, 17-Bit wants us to get together with friends to muck around and have a laugh. It's a nice reminder of gaming's most enduring goal: fun. If only the industry at large could remember it more often.

It would also have been nice, for example, if alongside *Awaysis* we could have previewed The Initiative's *Perfect Dark* reboot this month, but instead we now know that we never will, thanks to Microsoft's latest jobs cull. In the name of efficiency – one of capitalism's great qualities, we're often told – Xbox has cut the cord on an investment of untold millions, seven years after it created the studio for the purpose of making the game, which doesn't sound very efficient at all.

And even assuming that *Perfect Dark*, or Rare's *Everwild*, weren't in great shape, this cost cutting may have more to do with the company's virulent drive to shift funds into AI than pragmatic development decisions. This speaks to the kind of capitalism that runs, well, most things these days, where turning a profit mutates into slavery to money. People become numbers, numbers are worshipped – a process of commodification and fetishisation. As technocrat bosses seek the wealth promised by computers that seem human, they begin to think like machines.

Xbox in particular is now a brand we associate primarily with acquisitions, platform strategies and tone-deaf corporate speak; its game showcases and stories such as this month's cover feature are oases in the detritus of its business dealings. And if the controversy around its purchase of Activision was framed around potential monopoly, more pressing is its power to downsize a chunk of the industry out of existence. As developers fight for their livelihoods, then, simple fun appears to be the last thing on Xbox's mind. And, as our attempts at escapism are colonised by the pressures we're trying to escape, perhaps it's a luxury we can't afford either.

MOST WANTED

Fable

PC, Xbox Series

Forgive us for being concerned about any firstparty game left out of Xbox's SGF showcase. The lack of recent information about this reboot, barring its delay to 2026, has left it looking like a tall tale. Fingers crossed for a happy ending.

Hades II

PC, Switch, Switch 2

Just over a year into its early-access phase, June's Unseen update promises to be the last before a full launch, with only the true ending left to add. Having revisited to check that things are in good shape, we await a 1.0 release date.

Professor Layton And The New World Of Steam

Switch, Switch 2

We still don't know much about it, but last we heard Level 5's latest is still due to feature in Switch 2's lineup this year. It's been long enough since the prior instalment that we've missed the Prof and his particular brand of puzzles.

H | Y
P | E

WRECKREATION

This exhaustive construction
kit may lead to Burnout

Developer	Three Fields Entertainment
Publisher	THQ Nordic
Format	PC, PS5, Xbox Series
Origin	UK
Release	2025

For those who've spent the past 17 years paying repeat visits to one of *Burnout Paradise*'s many iterations, blitzing around its open world and daring to contemplate what a modern equivalent might look like, *Wreckreation* may have some answers. This game from Three Fields Entertainment, a team formed by members of Criterion (already responsible for spiritual successor *Dangerous Driving*), quickly convinces us that every effort has been made to recapture the petrol-fumed highs of its inspirations. And if the racing sparks nostalgia as soon as we hit the asphalt, there's an added layer of creativity to dig into as well: as the name implies, this is a game of building *and* destroying.

Constructed around a sprawling fictional state divided into four counties, *Wreckreation* begins with a vast play area: 400 square kilometres of map with 450km of roads to race and build upon. At the core of this playground is the 'Game DJ', a pop-up menu offering you full control of the world and everything in it, including the placement of ramps, structures and thousands of objects, such as trees, dinosaurs and giant rubber ducks.

Crucially, this is all part of general play: born from the team working collaboratively in-engine during development, the feature evolved into a core component. "We didn't want mixing to be tucked away as a separate

mode," **Fiona Sperry**, CEO of Three Fields, explains. "It had to be something you could do while your friends were still driving around having fun." What started with the simple dropping of a ramp for a friend to jump over became the driving force of *Wreckreation*: collaborative online play. It's about asking what we can build together, Sperry says, "but most importantly, what do we want to *do* together?"

During a fairly brisk demo session, we get through a lot of mileage. There's a startling amount to see in *Wreckreation*, with much of our time devoted to perusing the Live Mix, an impressive array of customisation features that enables us to build on top of the prefabricated environment. Taking a page from *GTA Online*'s absurdist racing playbook, we're equipped with a wealth of track pieces, ramps and pipes that can be stacked up into the clouds. Think vertically, and the sky becomes a vast canvas in its own right.

While preexisting structures can't be removed, virtually everything can be expanded upon. In one instance, we drive to the top of a spiral car park where we find ourselves in need of an exit. With a few clicks, we have a set of ramps and launchers that can slot seamlessly together at our disposal. It's a breezy, intuitive system and the prospect of unlocking increasingly audacious constructs ►

The game is ambitious in its scope, with the aim of delivering an entertaining sandbox racing experience that doesn't compromise on player creativity





WRECKREATION



should provide plenty to indulge our inner eccentric inventor. We don't get our hands on the most complex pieces (such as the impressively ludicrous vortex and cyclone loops teased in trailers), but the prospect of making near-endless nauseating loops for friends and rivals has obvious appeal.

Of course, the implications of building tracks in realtime, with other players present, raise a wealth of chaotic possibilities. "Other players can drive and give you feedback on what you are building while you are building it," Sperry explains. "Some of our funniest moments in development have been driving a track other people are building in realtime and falling off the end because they didn't place the next piece in time."

Objects can also act as custom objectives, so you can easily create different types of challenges, including destruction, stunts and collecting items. Implementing all of this

"If I want to drop pipes down the hillside to create a big accident, let me do that"

wasn't without challenges. The team toyed with locking objects to the ground with a view to alleviating physics bugs posed by floating items, but realised that this could limit creativity. "If I want to place a cargo container in mid-air because I want to challenge my friends to jump into it, I should be able to do that," Sperry says. "If I want to drop concrete pipes down the hillside to create a big accident on the road below, again, let me do that." What about players creating things the team never expected, using assets in ways they weren't designed to be used? "That may cause issues down the line, but we're up for that."

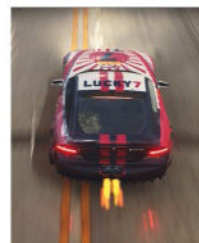
Behind the wheel, it's essential that *Wreckreation* should handle as well as its ancestors, and our early test drives are positive. Whether it's a sports car or flatbed truck, each vehicle drives smoothly and intuitively at regular speeds and also during boosts. "We had to get the core right," Sperry says. "Mario's jump is a fundamental element to every *Mario* game. For us, the equivalent was

making the handling of the car and the reactions and the crashes feel right. Without that as a foundation, nothing else could work."

In addition to crafting our own structures, it seems churlish not to take part in at least one head-to-head showdown with AI racers, which sees us focusing our efforts on battering fellow drivers off the track. To this day, few things are quite as satisfying as the *Burnout* experience of bombing down a road while dodging oncoming traffic in pursuit of rival racers, before sending them hurtling into slow-motion oblivion. Takedowns are back in all but name here, and they're every bit as joyous as they were two decades ago.

Still, it's almost a shame to see the game's sleek machines reduced to shambolic wrecks. Almost. Each is smartly rendered, factory smooth when it starts out, kitted out with its driver's preferred cosmetic tweaks. (Paint, wheels, licence plates and even horn and engine sounds are all customisable.) The environments are equally grand and adaptable. Whether you favour a summer's-day cruise along a country road or a frosty drag race across a snowy cityscape, the DJ menus allow for weather conditions to be changed and altered at will. While it's not clear how much this will affect handling, it certainly keeps the scenery varied. And if you want to alter the challenge with the flick of a switch, you can fiddle with the density of traffic.

Fundamentally, then, *Wreckreation* is about everything *but* the destination: the joy of the journey, in which ad-hoc obstacles and opportunities may now drop in from above, if you aren't adding them yourself. For the *Burnout* fan, it looks to build on the qualities of *Paradise* and *Takedown*, the openness and the opportunities for mayhem, by handing you a toolkit which — if the pieces continue to fit — will enable greater risk, reward and carnage. "We've always been inspired by how play happens in the real world," Sperry says, and points to the way children play outdoors, altering their games depending on who they're with and what they have to hand, whether that's balls, bicycles or something as simple as a hosepipe. "They will make up their own rules and have a great time doing so. That's the kind of game we wanted to make — one where the player is in control." ■



A perfect mix

More than simply a catch-all term for *Wreckreation*'s track-building components, Three Fields sees the Game DJ as analogous to the inner workings of a DJ booth. "A great DJ keeps the dancefloor full by blending songs to keep the beat going, reading the room and keeping it fun," Sperry says. "The host of our online game decides the rules and creates the play to keep everyone together." To that end, the DJ menus can be thought of as a mixing desk of sorts, and Sperry expects that some players will specialise as Game DJs. They can "hone their craft and push our game to its limits," she says, "both in terms of what they build in their worlds and how they combine rulesets together to make challenges we haven't even thought of."



TOP If you're looking for creative inspiration, *Wreckreation* delivers over 100 races created by the Three Fields design team. FAR LEFT Each of the 60-plus vehicles available boasts an assortment of customisation options, which can be applied on the fly without the need to visit a garage. ABOVE Sperry says that Three Fields will be monitoring social media in the wake of *Wreckreation's* launch to track how Game DJs are making use of the tools. LEFT Customisability may be the headline feature, but everything is built on the arcade-style racing roots of the *Burnout* series, from handling to destruction



H | Y
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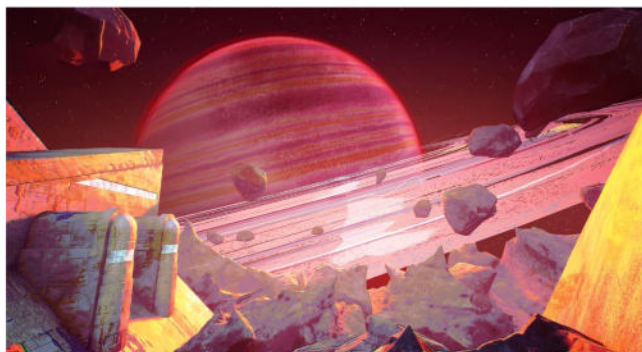
AMBROSIA SKY

Decoding mortality,
one scrub at a time

Developer/publisher	Soft Rains
Format	PC
Origin	Canada
Release	TBA



The dev team have strong CVs, with credits on games such as *Watch Dogs*, *Fallout* and *The Elder Scrolls*, but technical artist Fiona Jeeva's background in biochemistry proved especially helpful for narrative designer Kaitlin Tremblay's research

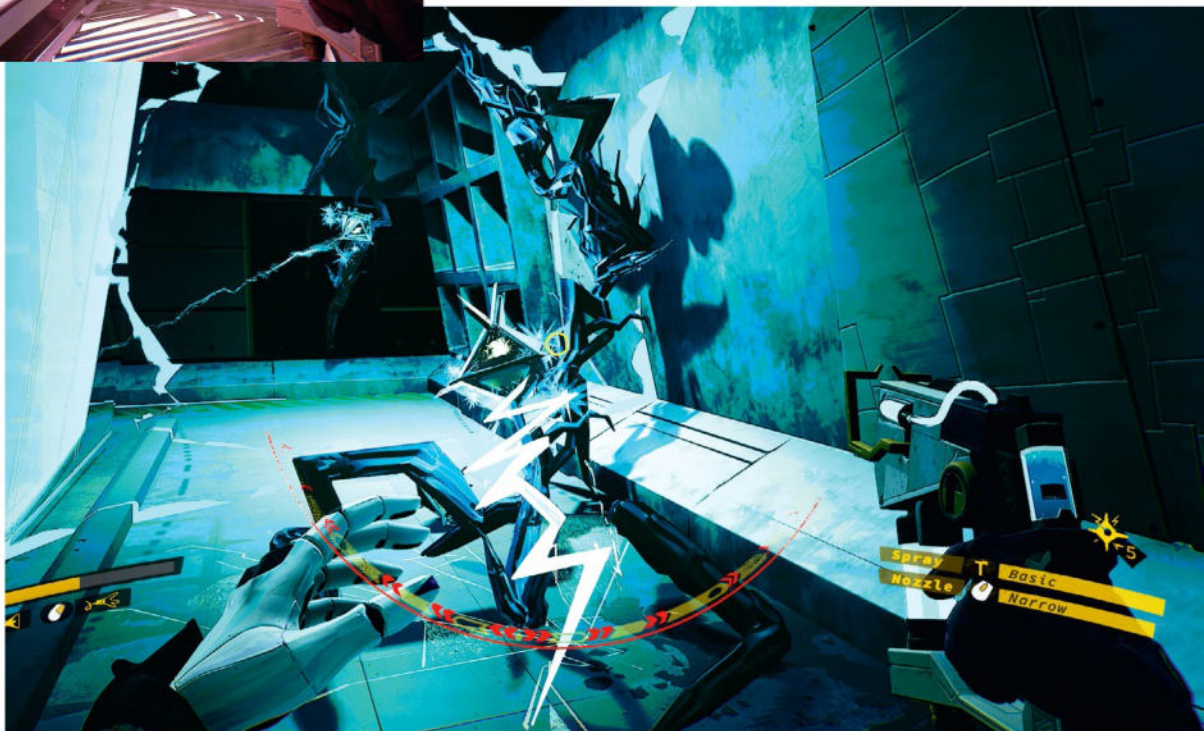


ABOVE Removing chunks of fungus with a chemical-spray gun is satisfying, causing a chain reaction of destruction as these towering organic structures topple over.

TOP RIGHT Dalia comes from the third generation of settlers on the Cluster, long after the initial gold rush prompted by the discovery of edible fungus had worn off.

MAIN Puzzles will have intended solutions, Burgess says, but the emergent nature of fungus on the Cluster will also allow experimental players to find their own answers to problems.

BELOW LEFT Tremblay cites *Outer Wilds* and *Subnautica* as major inspirations for *Ambrosia Sky*, alongside the Jeff VanderMeer novel *Annihilation* and its Alex Garland film adaptation. BELOW RIGHT Alien lifeforms on board the Cluster pose a threat, but you can take sneakier routes around the station to avoid combat





AMBROSIA SKY



Soft Rains co-founder Joel Burgess and narrative designer Kaitlin Tremblay

After our hands-on experience at Summer Game Fest, we're eager to jump back into the Cluster, the ruined space station at the heart of *Ambrosia Sky*. Minus the crowds and noise of the LA show floor, it's a luxury to take in the sights of this intriguing clean-'em-up at a more leisurely pace. Then again, the first message we read on an in-game terminal doesn't exactly feel like a warm welcome: "Who calls for the undertaker before they call for a doctor?" It's a reasonable question, and neatly encapsulates the liminal space which protagonist Dalia and her order, the Scarabs, occupy in Soft Rains' debut: not quite scientists, yet not quite spiritual figures either.

This point is perhaps best illustrated in the ritual of bioremediation. Your job as part of the mysterious organisation is to respond to catastrophes at human settlements across the galaxy, cleaning up afterwards. Often that equates to power-washing away aggressive outbreaks of contamination. But when you find bodies among the biomatter you must perform last rites and take samples to advance the Scarabs' research into reversing cellular decay – a hunt for immortality, effectively.

We find a sceptic in Dalia, a Scarab who fell into the role as a means to an end, more focused on the nuts-and-bolts of her work than this quixotic quest for longevity. Yet returning to her devastated home colony after over a decade away forces her to consider her role in a different light as she finds fragments of her former life scattered around – an email from her stepmother here, correspondence from an old friend there. "People who work in these professions sometimes have an emotional distance," studio co-founder **Joel Burgess** explains. "[But] she's laying to rest people she knew: friends, neighbours, rivals." He likens Dalia's emotional journey to someone preparing their will for the first time. "It forces you to consider things that could be uncomfortable."

We're not surprised that Dalia's mind has turned towards such a morbid topic. Death surrounds us at every turn as we explore the Cluster, yet not every corpse we stumble across is a suitable candidate for bioremediation: only those who had agreed while alive to participate in the Scarabs'

research are viable candidates. "The simple act of consenting says something about who they are," narrative designer **Kaitlin Tremblay** tells us, drawing a comparison with organ donation. "Who are the types of people who would opt in, and what does that say about them?" Beyond characterising what would otherwise be faceless victims, the question of consent is a vital one for Tremblay. "It felt really important on both an emotional level and on a scientific level," they explain. "People should be allowed to consent to what happens to their body."

The ritual itself incorporates elements of magical realism, but also takes inspiration from the real-world practice of mushroom burial suits, a blend of science and mysticism that was crucial for Tremblay. "I love the way humanity tells stories about the things we don't understand. I wanted to bring that folkloric storytelling to sci-fi," they say.

"I love the way humanity tells stories about the things we don't understand"

"How can we infuse this grandiosity into the science-based [work] of the Scarabs?"

We've explored many ruined space facilities littered with bodies in our time, but few have tackled the theme of mortality so directly. For Tremblay, science fiction provides a lens through which they can tackle such issues, while there is inspiration to be found for them in the concept of impermanence itself, even if the Scarabs might disagree. "Death terrifies me: it's unavoidable and it's so unknowable," they elaborate. "That is really creatively compelling."

Yet if their vision isn't exactly utopic, this is a story built around optimism. Dalia might not be able to find the source of eternal life, nor is it guaranteed that she can cure the rot engulfing her home. Yet in her small acts of remembrance, there's a sense of hope. "[Dalia] is here to clean up and preserve," Tremblay concludes. "To help lay the dead to rest and restore this space." It's a feeling we carry with us long after our return to the Cluster ends. ■



Mushroom kingdom

Tremblay is a literary genre buff, but when approaching the setting for *Ambrosia Sky*, they wanted to avoid comfortable, nostalgic tropes in favour of tackling contemporary issues such as food scarcity. "That got us thinking about: what would an exo-farm look like?" they explain. "What would be the kind of things that could grow?" Hence the game's focus on fungi, contrasting the austere hallways of the Cluster with writhing masses of the organic material. This decision also gave a framework for the game's physics-based puzzles, with bespoke algorithms dictating the spread of fungus throughout the station. "It's almost alien in the way it's so different from plants and animals," Tremblay continues. "There's this little bit of strangeness to it that's really appealing."

H | Y
P | E

DISPATCH

Trading the cowl for a telephone headset in a superhero call centre

Developer/publisher	AdHoc Studio
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2025

During a recent interview, James Gunn, director of the latest Superman reboot, was asked about the spectre of superhero fatigue. The problem, he argued, wasn't superheroes, but rather the fact that so many superhero movies have decided to tell the same story. The makers of *Dispatch*, which you can view as a game about superhero fatigue – it's definitely about fatigued superheroes – clearly agree with Gunn. In *Dispatch*, a down-on-their-luck superhero crashes out of the costumed world and goes to work as a telephone dispatcher for other heroes. The game is filled with outlandish characters with wild powers, but many of them are working in a drab call centre and dealing with the petty injustices of office life. So, when it comes to superhero stories, **Nick Herman**, COO at AdHoc Studio, is clear: "A lot of stuff that it seems that other people care a lot about, we try not to."

There's an excellent reason for this. As pithy and punkish as *Dispatch* is, it's not a product of contrarianism as much as it's an attempt to dig a bit deeper into familiar fantasies and make them jarringly human again. "We like to look at different corners of this stuff and find our own interesting questions to answer," Herman says. "Every scene to us is really about the characters and what's happening, their heads in the scene,"

adds **Dennis Lenart**, Herman's fellow co-founder and director at AdHoc. "We try to craft it in a way that's relatable and feels like it would be an interesting scene full of conflict if these people didn't have powers."

Talking so much about scenes and drama makes sense for these people. Herman and Lenart both spent time at Telltale Games making story-based adventures such as *The Wolf Among Us*, and their team at AdHoc is filled with people who have worked at the narrative end of videogames. *Dispatch* should not come as a surprise, then. A lot of what we've seen and played feels like watching a cartoon: Robert Robertson, formerly Mecha Man, is on his first day of work in an office where every cubicle contains a costumed eccentric. The tone is melancholic and the humour is often brutal, but then Robertson loads up his computer and *Dispatch* becomes something else entirely.

Robertson's new job revolves around monitoring a map of the game's city and dispatching members of a pool of superheroes to a variety of emergencies that pop up over time. This is partly about finding patterns. The pool of heroes is small and the jobs vary, so Robertson must match his heroes' traits to the emergencies, prioritising speed one moment and charm the next. But as the



AdHoc co-founders Dennis Lenart and Nick Herman

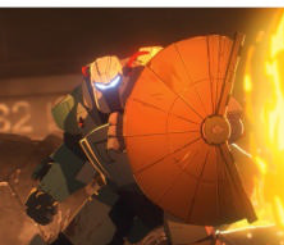


The humour is broad, but there's a winning surrealism that comes simply from the juxtaposition of different types of superhero





DISPATCH



emergencies heat up, it's also a question of logistics, of sending out a person who's just good enough for a certain job, perhaps, so that the roster left behind still has breadth for whatever might come their way next.

It's bracingly systems-based for a team of this lineage. Yet the narrative is the thing that flows over all the game's elements, merging cutscene and dispatch sequence with more familiar moments in which Robertson must navigate conversations with his colleagues. Is such a puzzle-based core a challenge for the designers, though? Herman explains that the game still started with story, which can make it seem as though AdHoc is approaching development backwards. "Instead of doing what most game studios do, which is work on the gameplay and figure out what makes it sticky, what makes it fun, we do our version of that with the story and the world and the characters," he says. "And then, OK, how do we

"There are rakes in the yard everywhere in the world of superheroes"

integrate gameplay into that?" The team knew early on that the player would be sitting at a desk, so the question was about what kind of action they should be performing. "We did a lot of prototyping early on," Herman says. "And we had a lot of stuff that wasn't fun. So we luckily landed here."

Ultimately, it's about balance. "We've worked with designers who [argued that] the story was the backbone and had the final say in everything," Lenart says. "And then we've also worked on projects where the design is the most important thing, and the story is there to kind of help. And we've always had the mentality that the blend between those two is where we want to be."

Throwing superheroes in naturally makes things more complex. Even in a game such as this, which pokes fun at capes and powers, you're adding a lot of unstable metahuman dynamism to the design. Again, though, balance, iteration and following instincts seem to be the answer. "A lot of

heroes are left on the cutting-room floor," Herman says. "But, honestly, I don't think there's a lot of science to this." Some characters emerged from the art department, he says, where a drawing that just looked good sparked ideas and iteration. Others began from an archetype, such as the loner stealth assassin, and the team decided how to put a spin on it.

Occasionally a character would break the game a little and they had to move powers around, or their inventions would butt up against more established superheroes. One character, Rhythm, created portals that made her massively overpowered in the game, Herman says, so her ability was shifted to another, Malevola. "And then *Marvel Rivals* came out," he sighs, "and it reminded everyone that the character Magik exists, who has a giant sword and creates portals, so now we're dealing with that. There are too many landmines. There are rakes in the yard everywhere in the world of superheroes."

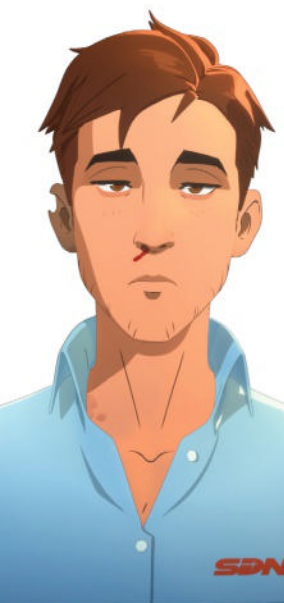
AdHoc, which was founded in 2018, has a team of about 30 developers, and scripting emerges from a writers' room. Taking into account the use of Hollywood acting talent — *Dispatch*'s cast includes Aaron Paul and Jeffrey Wright — and the heavy focus on animation, we ask Lenart if the team think of AdHoc as an unusual type of videogame studio. "We are different," he says. "And it's been one of the challenges of development, in a good way." He highlights the fact that a barrier to entry to some of the games the team has worked on in the past is that, "You could get someone who said, 'Oh, I heard this is really good, but I saw it, and it just kind of looked videogame-y.'" *Dispatch*, in comparison, looks like TV animation. "So we had to make a pipeline internally that was a hybrid between this typical TV animation style and game development, which is really fun because we get to invent a lot of things and processes along the way."

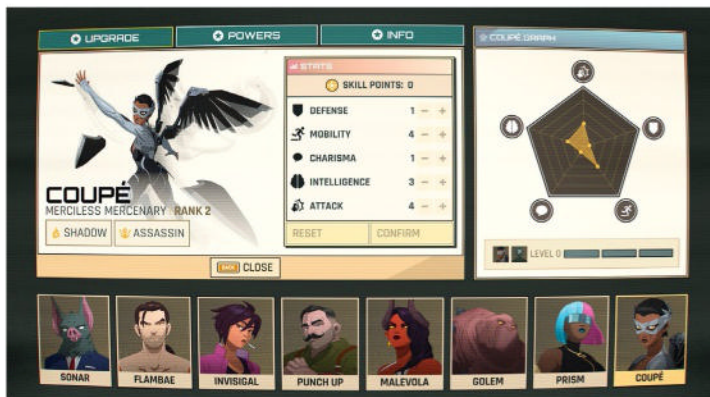
"*Dispatch* is, for us, the beginning of something new," agrees Herman. He sees media as only getting more interactive, not less, and that people are getting more comfortable watching television while holding their phones. "We want to make things that those people see and go, 'Oh, I could play that.'" He laughs. "So that's what we're doing." ■



What's funny about it?

The difficulty balancing of countless games has been knocked awry when designers have grown so used to the challenges they've created that they've started to believe everything is too easy. In *Dispatch*, the team encountered a similar phenomenon, but with jokes. "Obviously there's a lot of comedy in this," Lenart says. "Jokes are funny the first time, and a little bit the second time, then you hear them 1,000 times and you start to question everything." The solution was to get an outside perspective, something AdHoc recently achieved with its Steam demo, because nobody inside the studio could judge their own material. "It's like that Coraline meme — the guy with the glasses, and he's just sitting at his desk, staring," Herman says. "That's all the developers, because nothing is funny any more."





TOP The main desktop screen encourages you to categorise heroes by their attributes to ensure you always have a balanced squad.
 ABOVE Conversations between superheroes are filled with potential minefields. Absolutely everyone is on the back foot in *Dispatch*



TOP Hero designs exist in a perfect gap between convincing and quietly silly. There's a distinct Silver Age feel to the game.
 ABOVE There's plenty of superhero spectacle scattered throughout the game, although it remains a black comedy at heart.
 LEFT Managing a team whose members essentially hate being managed is a core challenge in *Dispatch*

Developer 17-Bit
 Publisher
 Cult Games
 Format PC, PS5,
 Xbox Series
 Origin Japan
 Release TBA



AWAYSIS

What's the story? Brawling glory

Kyoto-based 17-Bit has tried its hand at different genres and platforms, but one of CEO **Jake Kazdal**'s ambitions has always been to make a *Zelda*-style action adventure. Indeed, Nintendo's series has been formative for Kazdal, who discovered the NES original after a skateboard accident kept him housebound one summer holiday. And yet the influence isn't immediately apparent in *Awaysis*' arcade-oriented mission structure, in which diminutive fox Auro journeys to the titular floating island to battle evil goblins.

17-bit is labelling *Awaysis* a dungeon brawler, a reference to its physics-based combat and the knockabout mayhem that comes from double-handing a large weapon and swinging it at an enemy at the edge of a platform, or a perfectly timed and directed deflection. During our time with an early build we trigger a bug which makes only our character's weapons visible, but that inadvertently serves to highlight the physics at play and the way impacts are generated on the fly. "It doesn't feel like a game where you're playing canned animations," Kazdal says. "There are reactions happening to everything you're doing."

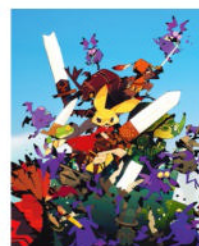
The same goes for the environment. One early room simply offers a big slope for us to slide down, while crates that may hold resources might smash or merely tumble along the ground depending on the force and momentum of the blow. And if melee-based destruction is the focus, we also unlock sprites that grant us spells — one charges up a tidal wave that we can ride as it knocks away enemies. It's all decidedly more colourful and chaotic than the studio's more unforgiving and sombre VR survival game *Song In The Smoke*, which wasn't the ideal game to be making during a pandemic, Kazdal reflects. "It was a very extreme example of a bunch of extreme things. [So] for this game, I wanted to laugh, I wanted to get together with my friends, I wanted to fuck around."

Auro is gradually joined by other animal allies, including Cicero, a frog you have to rescue from being boiled alive in what he's

mistaken for a hot tub. That also means missions can be played with up to four players locally or online, as Kazdal drops in with us for a session straight from the hub. This is where the penny drops — the *Zelda* he's been thinking about during *Awaysis*' development isn't the NES game, but *Four Swords*.

"The idea is you're working together as a team, but you're also competing over resources," Kazdal says. "So you go immediately from working together to fighting each other." Case in point: one room contains an optional puzzle requiring both characters to stand on switches for a chest to appear. As treasure spills out, we scramble for the spoils while knocking each other away. Also, rare upgrade gems can only be pocketed after holding a button down for a certain time, which also means there's a chance to pinch them off a teammate/rival at the last moment. "There's no friendly fire, but there are friendly... reactions," Kazdal says with a grin.

Ultimately, the physics allow for these intervals of competitive antics, a sign of how



Old-school modern

With *Awaysis*, 17-Bit is attempting to capture the essence of older games without emulating their aesthetics, in line with its philosophy of "16-bit games with a modern flair". This includes collaborating with veteran creators such as character artist Satoshi Matsuura, whose credits include *Legend Of Mana*, *Mother 3* and the *Bravely* series. Kazdal also enlisted former Nintendo composer Hirokazu 'Hip' Tanaka for his first new game score in three decades, following his tenure as president of Creatures. "We gave him some cues like, 'This is supposed to be an action game, it's happy, it's boisterous, it's old-school, but also modern', then we just let him rip," Kazdal says, adding that the result was more influenced by dub reggae than chiptune. "I've listened to some of these tunes 10,000 times. It just doesn't get old."

You have to rescue Cicero from being boiled alive in what he's mistaken for a hot tub

Gang Beasts has also been an important inspiration, although in *Awaysis* 17-Bit aims to blend that sense of emergence with tight, arcade-style inputs. We're also treated to a sample of several PvP modes where those influences are even more explicit, from a free-for-all in which you try to knock each other off a platform to another where you must kick, throw or bat goblin skulls into opposing goals. "Even though you can run through the campaign in probably under ten hours, we want *Awaysis* to be heavily replayable," Kazdal explains. "The idea is that this stuff is very dynamic and very playful. It's the essence of just fucking around and having a good time." ■

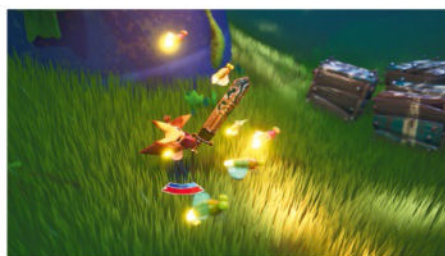


17-Bit CEO Jake Kazdal



LEFT Even without slopes, you can gain a speed boost by performing a 360-degree spin in the air and then hitting slide just as you land

RIGHT Early enemies aren't mere fodder – they're designed to fight dirty, and may retreat when low on health, while some may even try swiping any resources lying around. BELOW Difficulty sliders help to keep older missions fresh, as does the addition of higher-tier enemies to levels you've already completed, to scale with your progress. BELOW RIGHT There's a natural and colourful vibe that's designed to appeal to all ages, although Kazdal assures us that there'll be darker levels as you get deeper into the Awaysis



Developer
Alkimia Interactive
Publisher THQ Nordic
Format PC, PS5,
Xbox Series
Origin Spain
Release TBA



GOTHIC

A Spanish remake looking to fulfil some German fantasies

Listen carefully and you may hear the buzz. It's a little more distant than it is for many remake projects, but it's there. *Gothic*, Piranha Bytes' 2001 action RPG, is loved more in its native Germany than elsewhere, mainly for its intricate worldbuilding and an ambitious approach to player autonomy. Despite never quite breaking through internationally, it did well enough to garner sequels and spinoffs, and more recently the interest of THQ Nordic, which acquired and resurrected the fading IP. A playable teaser for a remake was offered up in 2019, and shocked fans by reworking many of the series' mechanics — a response that, it turns out, the developers very much wanted.

"To provoke strong reactions, we decided to go to the extreme opposite of what we believed players might expect or want," says **Reinhard Pollice**, studio head and director at Alkimia Interactive. With Piranha Bytes now defunct, his team, based in Spain, has taken the series' reins. In showing something unexpected, the aim was to discover which aspects of the game the fanbase cared most

"We decided to go to the extreme opposite of what we believed players might expect"

about. "We had always believed that the original game held up quite well and included many great elements," Pollice says, "so this became the natural direction for us to pursue."

Gothic once again takes place in a vast open world, where humans and orcs are locked in a mutually destructive war. Amid the fighting, criminals are tasked with mining resources while a group of mages erect a barrier over the mining colony. The story begins with a nameless protagonist being condemned to the mines — the first step in a tale Alkimia was eager to flesh out further. "The original's final plot was developed during the last nine months of production, so some parts felt

rushed or weren't properly explained," Pollice notes. "The orcs play a major role and in the original your only goal was essentially to get rid of them. We took the opportunity to go deeper, allowing players to explore orc culture and see the world from their perspective."

Walking a line between grim reality and high fantasy, the remake's world contrasts starkly with that of the low-poly original. But what remains old-school is the way it forces you to forge your own path, providing little in the way of guidance. From the outset you fend for yourself, earning skill points and seeking NPCs to train you. With no waypoint markers, navigation is dependent on sourcing a map, which reveals little more than your current position — and this is in a land that's grown significantly. "Depending on the area, the game has about 15 to 30 per cent more landmass," Pollice says. "The original was quite small and everything was very compressed. The goal was to give the world more breathing room and more space to add the kind of detail a realistic-looking game needs."

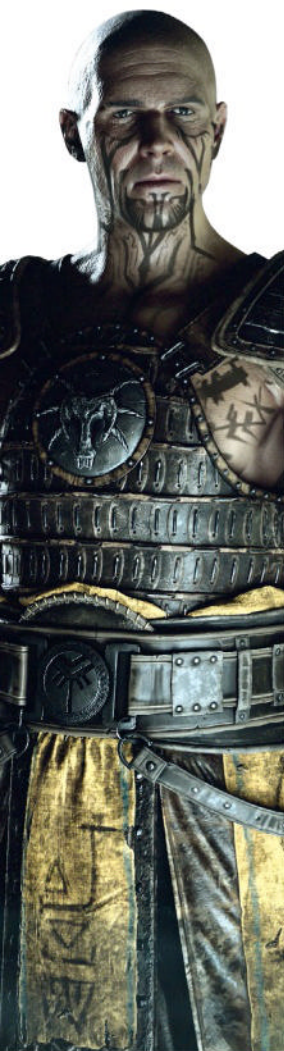
Combat has also required attention. The 2001 game was notable for using directional keys to dictate the trajectory of attacks. While Alkimia admired the idea — "I actually think it's pretty cool," Pollice says — it was decided that the remake needed to align more closely with modern standards. "We didn't copy this mechanic one-to-one," Pollice says, "but our combat system is rooted in it. We developed a very intuitive system that still respects directional attacks."

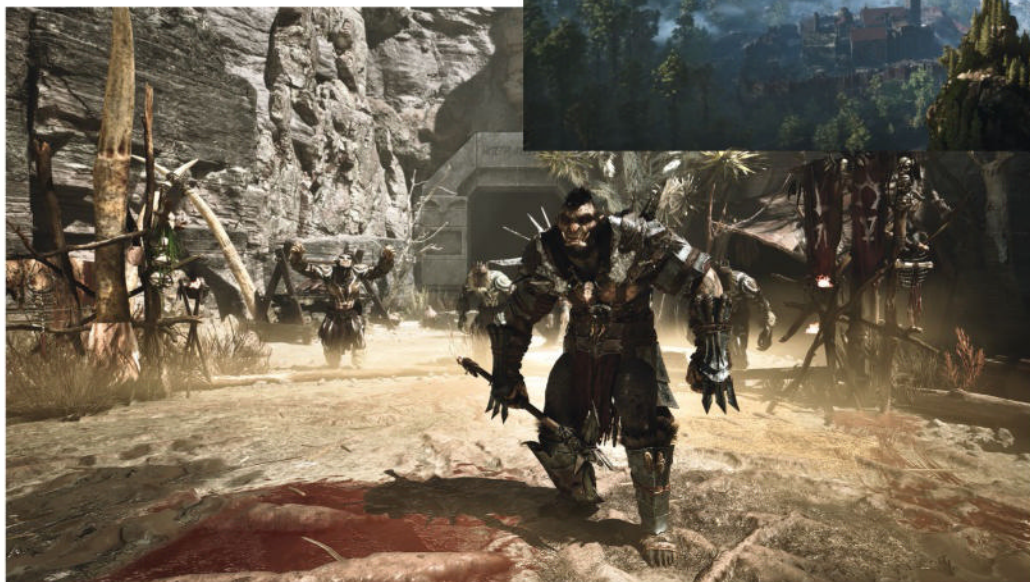
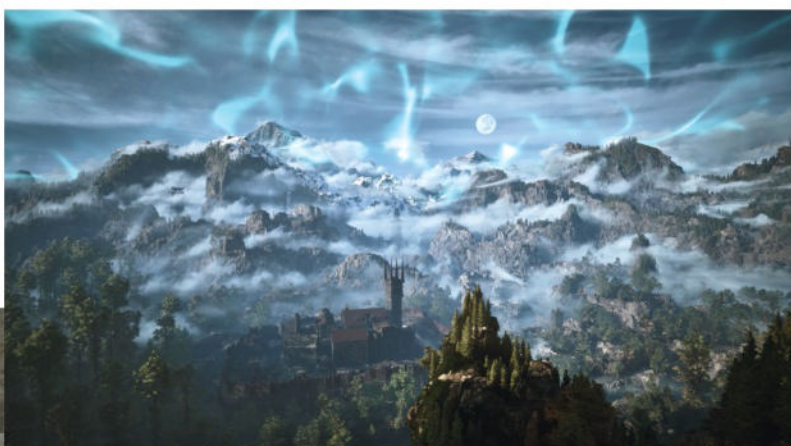
Alkimia hopes to find a balance that honours the source material while bringing it up to date. Naturally, the team have kept a keen eye on audience feedback. "Every asset we release gets analysed in detail," Pollice says. "Sometimes it can drive you crazy, because without seeing the complete picture, people tend to be very critical of small details." Perhaps that's an inevitable part of the buzz. "There's always a demand for more, no matter how positively people react to something." ■



Nod to the mods

The original *Gothic* has continued to receive extensive support from an avid modding community, something the team at Alkimia were mindful of going into the remake. "Some of our team members, including myself, come from the modding scene, or were quite involved in modding a few years ago," Pollice tells us. And while he and his colleagues are aware that Unreal isn't the most mod-friendly engine, from the outset they have been eager to explore ways to keep things as open as possible, staying true to the spirit of the original and its fanbase. "Much of our gameplay data is actually set up using a scripting language, AngelScript," Pollice says, "which allows people to create their own mechanics, behaviours and even story flows."





ABOVE The world is populated by an assortment of characters whose daily routines can be learned, followed and exploited in order for you to further your goals

TOP Recreating and modernising the complex, feature-rich spell system of the original has proved to be a challenge for Alkimia Interactive, but the team believe it will offer a rewarding experience.

ABOVE Previously the subject of some criticism, special attention was paid to the game's English translation, which informed some changes to dialogue and the game's overall narrative.

MAIN Player autonomy and freedom of choice to explore is an integral component of *Gothic's* appeal and something that remains at the core of the remake



Developer
Snapshot Games Inc
Publisher Arc Games
Format PC
Origin Bulgaria
Release TBA



Snapshot is aiming to adapt 130 quests for the final game, with around 35 featured in the initial early-access launch

FROSTHAVEN

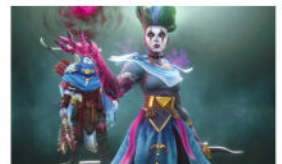
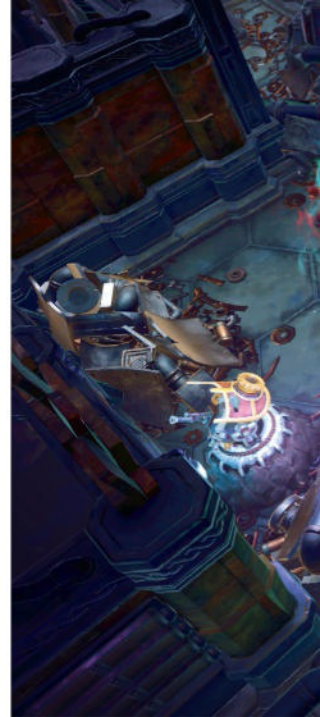
Snapshot's boardgame adaptation looks to retain a human touch

Turning a boardgame into a videogame is no mean feat, but when it came to adapting the rulesets, monsters, character classes and scenarios of tabletop favourite Frosthaven, the team at Snapshot Games found themselves in a fortunate position. The brainchild of game designer Isaac Childres, the Frosthaven boardgame was the subject of a staggeringly successful crowdfunding campaign. Yet, as it turns out, Childres originally had other plans.

"He really wanted to make a videogame," game director **Hristo Petkov** reveals. "That's why the boardgame feels like a videogame. He didn't have the knowhow or the resources to

create a videogame, which is why he created the boardgame." While alterations are still required in the digital translation, then, it's been a relatively smooth process. "[Childres is] protective of the IP and the universe he's trying to create, of course," Petkov says, "but he's very understanding that we need to change some stuff."

A dark-fantasy tactical RPG, *Frosthaven* builds on foundations laid by the 2021 adaptation of its predecessor, *Gloomhaven*, developed by Flaming Fowl Studios. With singleplayer and two/fourplayer co-op modes, it works much like its tabletop counterpart. Its turn-based combat employs an ability card



Frosthaven's imagery draws heavily on artwork by the team at Cephalofair, the boardgame's creator, which served as a valuable creative springboard



Hristo Petkov (game director) and Julian Gollop (CEO, Snapshot Games)



The game's mechanics have been adapted as faithfully as possible, with changes to certain scenarios being made sparingly, and in conjunction with the original creative team

system, which requires careful planning in order to unleash tactical attacks, execute combos and keep party members alive. As a result, your starting class is one of the most important choices you'll make, and the first of many consequential decisions that await.

To ease new players in, Snapshot saw accessibility as key. The newly added Story

"This is kind of the spirit of the boardgame. You can play it however you like"

difficulty mode gives you more health and power while omitting time limitations – a core mechanic of the boardgame. In the early-access phase, a short introductory campaign has been added, in addition to a tutorial, incorporating all the elements of the game you can expect to encounter. "The main goal, long term, is to make the game way more customisable to your liking," Petkov explains. "This is kind of the spirit of the boardgame. You can make your house rules and you can play it however you like."

Having got to grips with the basics, we start the campaign by creating two heroes

from four character classes – Banner Spear, Boneshaper, Drifter and Deathwalker. Each has their own origin story and abilities, and while we gravitate towards the Deathwalker's long-range attacks, the mix of playstyles on offer should complement each other well. It's easy to see how experimentation with combinations will keep things varied.

Each class has unique ability cards. The Boneshaper, for instance, specialises in necromancy, which draws down energy and depletes health in the process. The payoff sees us supported by summons that act as a distraction, granting breathing room. These cards are scarce, however, and they can't be used repeatedly, so summons are a valuable resource. As a result, we need to take a risk and think strategically to keep our party alive. Take our first quest, which sees us pursuing a group of raiders across a mountain range. Here we encounter two warring factions of orc-like creatures known as Algox, and join forces with a solitary priest NPC, whose survival we must ensure as we battle through a horde of enemies. Success involves juggling carefully timed attacks and resource management.

Still, if things go wrong, Snapshot is in the midst of adding a feature requested by many *Gloomhaven* players: an undo command. Working closely with a 'community council' of fans of the boardgame, the team are eager to ensure broad appeal while catering to the needs of its core audience. "It's not a small feature," Snapshot CEO **Julian Gollop** says. "There are lots of special rules and stuff in the scenarios which need to support undo as well, which is a little bit tricky." If the rules and fiction have flowed easily from boardgame to videogame, then, the analogue flexibility of the tabletop is harder to translate. ■

A class apart

When he created Frosthaven's varied character classes, Childres made a conscious decision to avoid fantasy clichés, as names such as Deathwalker and Banner Spear imply. "Because they're not stereotypical, almost everything is custom tailored to this universe," Petkov says. "For example, the Banner Spear is in medieval armour. You might expect that is a European style thing, but she's intended to be Polynesian, which was an interesting challenge for us to do. It was a fun journey." A lot of work has gone into the animation and visual effects for every card that has an effect on your avatar, Gollop adds. "In many cases, there's a unique representation for that character to reflect what the character is actually about."

Prioritising loot over attacks mid-battle may lead to your troops taking damage, but it could give you a strategic edge in the long run





ROUNDUP

GHOST OF YOTEI

Developer/publisher SIE (Sucker Punch) Format PS5 Origin US Release October 2



Sucker Punch's deep-dive presentation suggests it has addressed some of the criticisms of *Tsushima's* somewhat boilerplate design. In *Yotei*, open-world exploration should be driven to a greater extent by clues, which point to areas of interest where you might learn different kinds of skills. The vastness of the landscape also seems well considered – as you seek vengeance on a gang of six, it feels right that they should be spread far and wide, and hard to track. There are still signs of more pedestrian filler, however, in the form of bamboo strikes and altars, which we hope doesn't clutter an otherwise majestic adventure.

DAEMON X MACHINA: TITANIC SCION

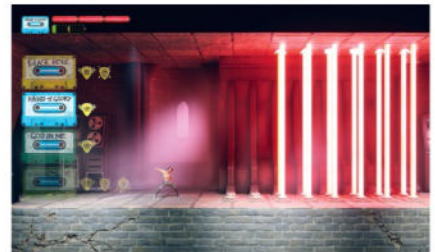
Developer/publisher Marvelous (Marvelous First Studio)
Format PC, PS5, Switch 2, Xbox Series Origin Japan Release September 5



It's a concern that the latest trailer for this mech-anime sequel focuses so much on its characters rather than the action. A bloated cast and interminable chatter obstructed some zippy combat in the first game, and the dialogue we've been shown so far doesn't suggest much restraint, or improvement, this time around. It may be left to the design of the battles, then, to provide the game's real voice in the form of an orchestra of rockets and gunfire.

RHYTHM OF RESISTANCE

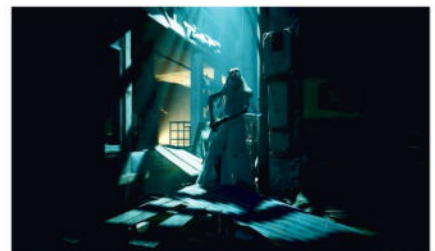
Developer/publisher NetherMoon Game Studio Format PC
Origin Sweden Release 2026



In this sleek *Metroidvania*, enemies and traps move in time to the music. And if the beat isn't to your liking, by switching collectable cassettes you can change it – a chilled track slowing the movement of deadly lasers, for example. The proof will be in the performance, but it's certainly a sound idea.

SLEEP AWAKE

Developer Eyes Out Publisher Blumhouse Games
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Origin US Release 2026



A waking nightmare is the promise from *Eyes Out*, a studio formed by Cory Davis – creative lead on *Spec Ops: The Line* – and Nine Inch Nails' Robin Finck. With people disappearing in their sleep, you're surrounded by folk who'll try anything to stay awake, and hallucinations born of your own exhaustion.

PERA CODA

Developer/publisher Elyzio
Format PC Origin Turkey Release TBA



There's a lot to see in Istanbul, but in this time-looping psychological adventure you may frequent the sights more than you bargained for. Trapped in a kind of purgatory, you relive memories, solve mysteries and become the judge of your own life. Hopefully there's time to stop for coffee too.

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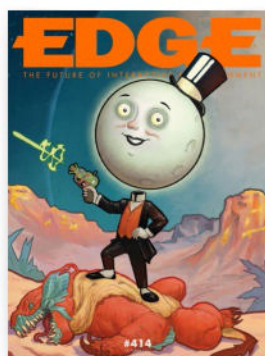
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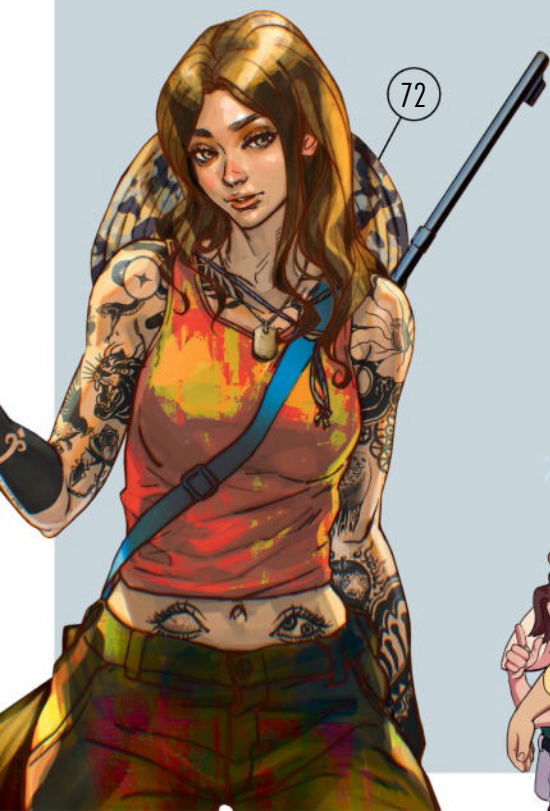
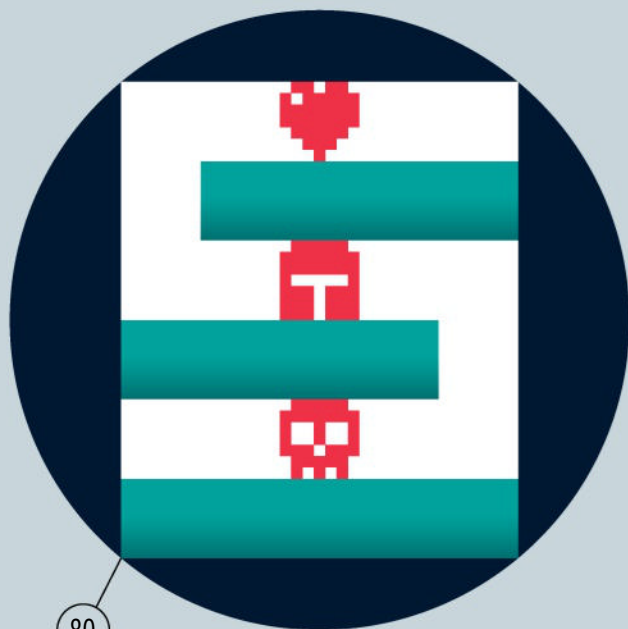
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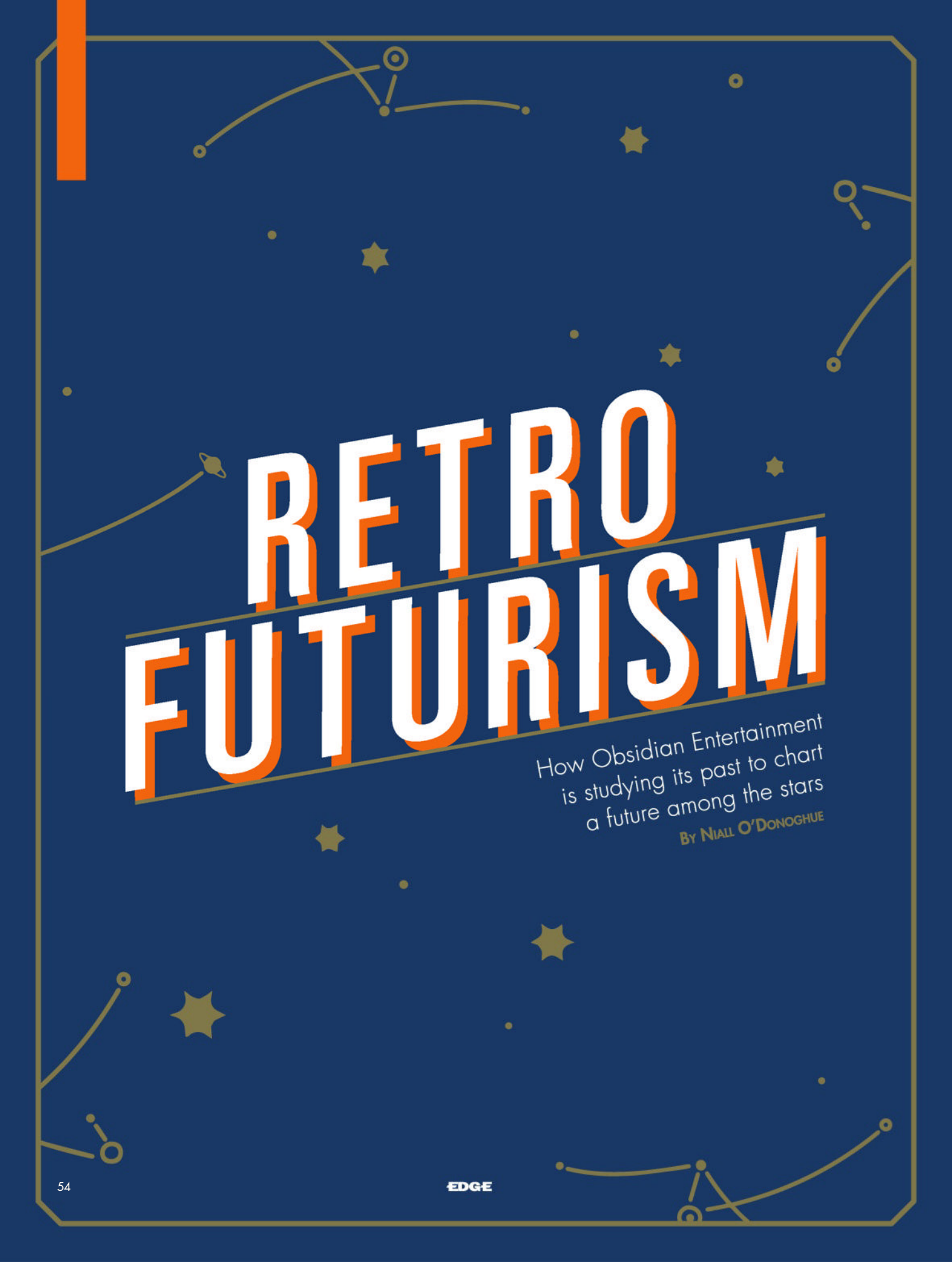
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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



- 54 Retro Futurism
- 72 Bound By Blood
- 80 Staying Alive
- 90 The Making Of...
Dynasty Warriors:
Origins
- 94 Studio Profile:
Ichigoichie
- 124 Time Extend:
Hollow Knight





RETRO FUTURISM

How Obsidian Entertainment
is studying its past to chart
a future among the stars

By Niall O'Donoghue



WE FIND A STUDIO DRIVEN BY A
DESIRE TO ACTUALISE DREAMS FORGED
DURING TEENAGE D&D SESSIONS



The town of Fairfield, formerly under Protectorate control, has been occupied by Auntie's Choice, with propaganda plastered on walls and projected onto its central statue

Game The Outer Worlds 2
Developer Obsidian Entertainment
Publisher Xbox Game Studios
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series
Release October 29



To recount the history of Obsidian Entertainment is, in many ways, to tell the story of modern roleplaying games. Cast an eye across its back catalogue and you'll find games including *Knights Of The Old Republic II*, *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Pillars Of Eternity*. Examine its roots, meanwhile, and you'll see the fingerprints of its founders on Interplay classics such as *Fallout*. For all of this lineage, though, 2025 feels like a marquee year for the company. *Grounded 2* and *The Outer Worlds 2* both represent direct sequels to in-house IPs, while the release of *Avowed* in February marked a continuation of the Eora universe established in *Pillars Of Eternity*. The studio that came up by standing on the shoulders of giants such as Bethesda and LucasArts is now carving its own path forward, creating its own sandboxes rather than expanding upon worlds created by others.

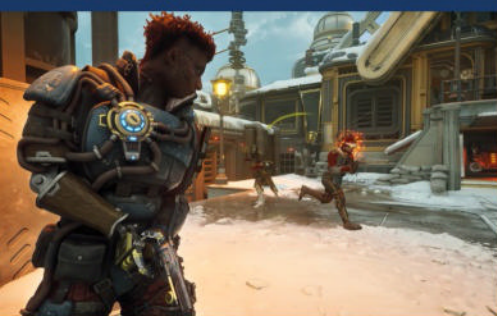
Much has changed since those early days: the studio now boasts a headcount of nearly 300 following its acquisition by Microsoft in 2018. Indeed, our hands-on time with *The Outer Worlds 2* revolves around the new, whether in the form of refined gunplay, expanded stealth systems or newfangled gadgets. But alongside these mechanical improvements we find a studio driven by a desire to actualise dreams forged during teenage D&D sessions, in an attempt to refine the fundamentals established by its founders over two decades ago.

"The heart of it, always, for me, has been the story, the world and the narrative, and it's very important that the story doesn't get in the way of the player having a great experience with their character," *The Outer Worlds 2* creative director **Leonard Boyarsky** tells us. "I don't think that changes with the technology."

This vision, as defined in *The Outer Worlds*, revolves around the nefarious megacorporations ruling Halcyon, a frontier colony established among the stars. For its sequel, Obsidian crash-lands us in Arcadia, a space colony in the midst of an armed conflict centred on the appearance of rifts throughout this world, and in the ensuing arms race which breaks out surrounding technology used to control them.

It's a setup reminiscent of Boyarsky's work on the original *Fallout* alongside Tim Cain, who is credited as a creative consultant on *The Outer Worlds 2* after co-directing the first game. But where *Fallout* was never originally intended to be a series, Boyarsky and Cain had different

“THAT WAS ALWAYS MY PLAN, IF WE
WERE FORTUNATE ENOUGH TO MAKE A
SEQUEL: GO MUCH BIGGER AND DEEPER”



TOP *Destiny* was a major source of inspiration for Singh when revamping gunplay for this sequel. ABOVE An optional thirdperson mode is available this time. RIGHT Our roguish build favours a knife to take down foes, but less subtle options for hand-to-hand combat will be available

plans this time around. “We established the world but we had a much smaller slice of it,” Boyarsky says. “That was always my plan, if we were fortunate enough to make a sequel: go much bigger and deeper.”

In 2008, Wells Fargo teller **Matt Singh** entered the lobby of Obsidian Entertainment in Irvine, California, sharply dressed for a job interview and anxious to make a good first impression. He was led to a small room, where instead of suited executives he was greeted by a group of developers lounging on faux-leather furniture, some barefoot, others wearing sandals. For industry newcomer Singh, it was quite the culture shock. “I’m like, what the eff is going on?” he laughs today. But the RPG fanatic soon found himself in good company, surrounded by creatives who shared his passion.

Brandon Adler smiles at the memory. He was one of the developers who interviewed Singh, after all, and soon loaded up the unfortunate newbie with a series of particularly unglamorous tasks. “Unfortunately for him, he ended up getting the stuff that was a pain in my ass when I was a QA lead,” Adler recalls. “He was always the right-hand man.”

The duo’s job titles have changed somewhat since then: we talk to them in their capacities as design director and game director, respectively, on *The Outer Worlds 2*. When tasked with building out this sequel, though, the pair found themselves shifting back to the dynamic established over 15 years ago on the QA floor as Adler presented Singh with, in his words, an unreasonable request: “Can you completely overhaul all of our stealth systems, gunplay systems and combat? And, by the way, I want to make the RPG [systems] really sing and be the star of the show.”

It wouldn’t be unreasonable to question the need for such a thorough overhaul, particularly since the studio’s first outing in this universe found critical and commercial success upon its release in 2010. But while the decision to greenlight a sequel was a certainty from a financial perspective, there was also a sense of unfinished business among the team. “Even before the game shipped, I did a full breakdown of the things I thought were lacking in the game that we wanted to add in the next one,” Adler explains, citing low-hanging fruit such as gunplay and enemy variety, along with the scope of the world. “We put a lot of effort into not only

making bigger spaces, but filling them out with really cool content for players to discover.”

As every true fan of the genre knows, however, the most important decisions are made before you even begin your first playthrough. Perks and flaws return from the first game, enabling you to build your character out modularly, but they’re bolstered by a suite of intriguing additions. Particularly amusing is the ‘bad knees’ flaw, which increases your movement speed at the cost of your joints popping loudly upon straightening your legs. The ‘serial killer’ trait also holds a certain twisted appeal, rewarding the ruthless slaughter of innocent NPCs with collectable hearts, used to raise your maximum health.

The increased granularity of these systems is paired with a streamlined skill tree and an increased focus on interactivity in the world at large. In a straightforward example, we are presented with the most fundamental of obstacles: a locked door. Those with the Brawny perk can prise it open with their bare hands, while engineers can use tools to break their way in. If you specialise as an explosives expert, meanwhile, you can simply blast your way through. Similarly, a quest that requires us to cross a guarded bridge can be approached in a number of ways. Do you sneak through quietly, acquire equipment that allows you to traverse the terrain underneath, or surrender one of your companions to secure safe passage?

“It was very important we had these deeper RPG systems,” Adler says. “That’s the stuff that I grew up on and loved from our earlier games and other CRPGs. I wanted to make sure we injected that back in.”

These changes tie into a theme that comes up repeatedly during our discussions, an ideal seemingly guiding every decision made by the studio: choice and consequence. “When we looked at *The Outer Worlds*, we saw clear lanes of improvement where the player fantasy of being a weapons expert or being a rogue could be heightened if we invested into how those things present, how they feel,” Singh explains. “It’s all trying to service the roleplaying experience: how can we get those archetypes to express [themselves] more fully?”

We put these assertions to the test during our demo, which tasks us with infiltrating a stronghold of the authoritarian Protectorate faction alongside floating robot Valerie and

RADIO CITY

One feature making a welcome return from *Fallout: New Vegas* is an in-universe radio you can use to keep you company during treks across Arcadia. Each faction will have its own station, with specific music tracks interspersed with DJs who will comment upon your actions in a similar manner to Mr New Vegas. Beyond appeasing those nostalgic for their time in the Mojave, this commentary is intended to give factions a larger presence in the world and broadcast their views more clearly. “They have their own [specific] version of propaganda or advertisements, and they have different views on events that have happened,” Singh says. There’s no word yet on the featured musical genres, although we suspect *The Ink Spots* won’t be putting in an appearance.



Leonard Boyarsky, creative director

Tristan, a Protectorate arbiter who mysteriously aligns with our intention to steal a Rift Modulator device from his allies. His background proves useful when we meet a holed-up researcher, who we discover was framed by a senior Protectorate official for an experiment gone wrong. Tristan pulls off a convincing impression of a contemptuous authority figure — an act we suspect is not much of a stretch for him — before we convince the researcher to aid us in our search for the modulator. All we have to do? Break into the official's office and access his computer, finding files that will clear the researcher's name.

Various options present themselves, in true Obsidian fashion: we could focus on diplomacy, talking our way through the facility peacefully, or we could go loud like a futuristic John McClane. We opt instead for a stealth-focused build, keen to play with some of the new toys made available to us. Replacing the under-developed rogue toolkit in the first game is a suite of gadgets including noisemakers, used to distract patrolling sentries, as well as a mask granting X-ray vision upon application.

The twisty environments we explore encourage us to seek out shortcuts and hidden paths, and we follow an Adam Jensen approach as we pick locks to access nearby vents in order to snoop around, eavesdropping on soldiers as we go. “We tried to make sure we had good stealth paths through most environments,” Adler says, explaining how strike teams of developers combed through set-pieces room by room to ensure that enough options were available to facilitate different playstyles. “Without bringing that level of detail into it, players are not going to be able to get the optimal experience, so we leaned more into that.”

Several rifts hang menacingly in the air as we explore, warping and distorting anything they come into contact with. The scene is striking, and tempts us to approach one of these interdimensional fissures for a closer look. Unfortunately, investigating the rift sees our character vaporised upon contact. Shaking ourselves off, we resume our hunt, popping out from the shadows to execute instant stealth kills. Adversaries will investigate the bodies of fallen comrades in classic stealth-game fashion, but an option for subtlety presents itself in Auntie's Acidic Dematerialiser, a dispenser which squirts corrosive sludge at unsuspecting victims, reducing them to a pile of goo in seconds. ▶



STRIKE TEAMS OF DEVELOPERS COMBED
THROUGH SET-PIECES ROOM BY ROOM TO
ENSURE ENOUGH OPTIONS WERE AVAILABLE



"Everybody loves the feeling that they can do whatever they want," Adler tells us. "You get to change what the world is doing, and then the world is reacting to that"

POSTER APOCALYPSE

We might be on the clock during our demo session with *The Outer Worlds 2*, but we find ourselves constantly distracted by the detailed artwork and posters plastered around the environment, acquiring further insight into this twisted universe via their striking images. For Alpert, such flourishes bring authenticity to the world, and reward players who are keen to stop and smell the roses. "If I can give a sense to the player that this is a real place that they can live and breathe in," he says, "and they can see themselves within this world and pick up on all those nuanced details, I feel I'm making a richer experience for them."

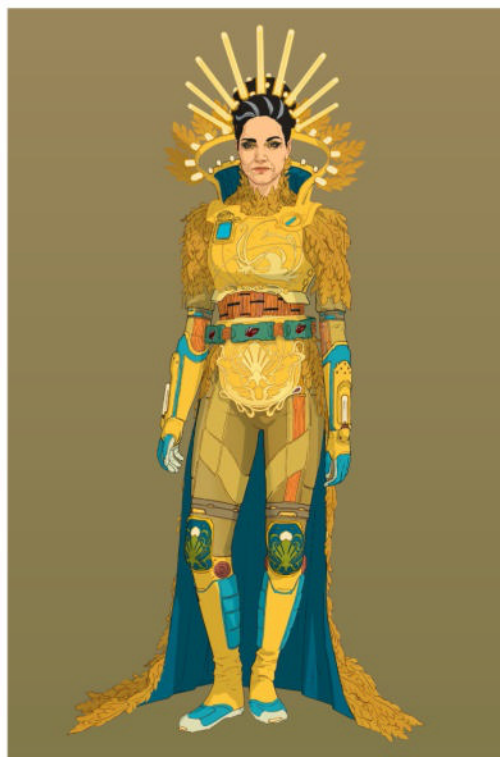
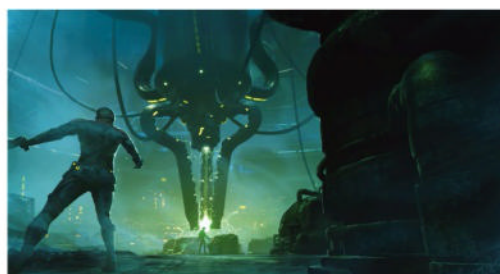
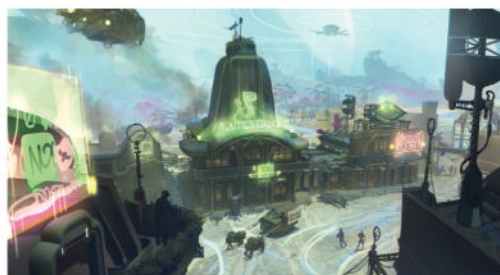


Despite our best efforts, however, we soon blow our cover and get our first taste of the revamped gunplay on offer. Falling from a rooftop vent, we hold the left bumper to slow time in mid-air before unloading an incendiary shotgun into an adversary, the screen filling with bright sparks flaring from the muzzle. While these actions align with our firefights in the first game, lining up targets feels noticeably snappier this time around, with fluid animations lending much-needed tactility to our actions.

Companion abilities remain a focal point of our strategy — we use the D-pad to direct Tristan to hammer foes in the face — but this time our armoury is bolstered by the option to deploy a temporary bubble shield. We use this bull-headed tactic to muscle our way through the final stretch of the mission, eventually locating the modulator and harnessing it to create floating platforms in the air. Using this powerful gadget, we sneak our way to the upper level of an antechamber as a hulking mech stamps below, our newfound verticality granting us access to the official's office where we locate the incriminating messages.

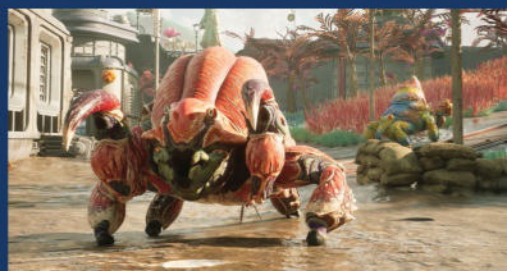
We hustle back to the researcher without alerting a single soul, feeling pleased with our handiwork, but our demo concludes before we can try another build. FOMO is a hard feeling to shake off in the best of circumstances in roleplaying games, and we're left wondering about the appeal of blasting through the facility like the Doom Slayer. Obsidian's recent showcase does at least allow us to vicariously experience weapons such as the Armageddon, a device which fires fleshy appendages that latch onto surfaces and slap nearby enemies. We leave our demo with a sense of an engine refined rather than reinvented, its rough edges buffed out. We will find out later, though, that *The Outer Worlds 2*'s changes go far beyond the corporeal, extending deep into the ghost in the machine.

It's hard to forget your first encounter with Mr House, or meeting the leader of Caesar's Legion. Coming face to face with these mythical figures after spending hours traversing the Mojave Desert proved to be some players' most memorable experiences of the Xbox 360 era, capitalising on the prominence factions have in *Fallout: New Vegas*, Obsidian's spinoff from the dystopian series. Yet for all of the similarities between the Halcyon and the nuclear wasteland, the cartoonishly evil Spacer's Choice failed to ►



Alpert's artistic decisions are guided by the same principle that dictated the aesthetic of *The Outer Worlds*: depicting a frontier colony in space

LINING UP TARGETS FEELS SNAPPIER THIS
TIME AROUND, WITH FLUID ANIMATIONS
LENDING TACTILITY TO OUR ACTIONS



LEFT Adler and Singh aim to make the fantasy of being a gun-toting soldier more accessible. ABOVE We don't encounter any xenomorphs in our session, but trailers promise a healthy influx of alien adversaries. BELOW Traversal now incorporates sliding and mantling alongside double-jumping – tweaks made to complement larger environments



“IN A LOT OF WAYS, THE OUTER WORLDS 2
DELIVERS ON THE FANTASY WE HAD
WHEN WE STARTED THE FIRST GAME”



Excuse another
reference to *Fallout*,
but it's impossible
not to compare the
devastating Big Bang
weapon to the Fat
Man rocket launcher



truly capture the imagination in a similar fashion in *The Outer Worlds*. “Because it was so much smaller and our time and resources were so much more restricted, we had to make a lot of decisions where we were making things shorter and easier to digest,” Boyarsky admits. “In a lot of ways, *The Outer Worlds 2* delivers on the fantasy we had when we started the first game.”

This time, our loyalties will be divided between the three main players in Arcadia: the authoritarian Protectorate, the corporate super-entity Auntie’s Choice, and the cult-like Order Of The Ascendant. Neon billboards dominate the landscape, in line with the art nouveau aesthetic established in the first game, but the onset of conflict between these factions has scarred Arcadia, dotting the landscape with trenches lined with barbed wire. The battlefields of World War I, plus the propaganda tactics employed by its participants, were a major source of inspiration for art director **Daniel Alpert**, and also served as a way to give each faction a distinct identity. In our journey through the Protectorate’s rift lab, for example, we spot several striking pieces of artwork, none more head-turning than a poster encouraging people to report anyone lacking appropriate zeal for “mental refreshment”. The details of this procedure are left mercifully unclear. “We still have [the theme of] capitalism run amok,” Alpert says, “but now we get to see how an authoritarian government fits into that, how a mathematically based religious order fits into that, and how these three different ideologies conflict against each other.”

Such flourishes should go a long way toward breaking up the tone of our journey, contrasting with the first game’s reliance on corporate satire. “We wanted each faction to have their own brand of humour and to feel different,” Boyarsky elaborates. “I’m looking for more of a balance. We still want it to feel like *The Outer Worlds*, but I wanted more shading, more subtlety in certain places.”

These larger conflicts are all well and good, but many of our fondest recollections of games in Obsidian’s back catalogue are of smaller moments shared with compatriots between major story beats, whether that’s joining lovesick engineer Parvati for a drink on the Groundbreaker or trading barbs with the foul-mouthed orlan Serafen aboard a pirate ship. With six companions available for our journey throughout Arcadia, Boyarsky hopes to double ►

BREAKING THE MOULD

The character you create will start out as an Earth Directorate Agent, a kind of space cowboy. Despite this specified role, however, your agent will remain fully customisable, rather than taking on a distinct personality like a protagonist such as Commander Shepard. "Even though you can make different choices about whether you're going to be someone who solves problems with diplomacy or guns, at the end of the day you're still that character," Boyarsky says. Rather than a mere preference, choosing to eschew predefined characters in favour of a blank canvas has been elevated to a principle by Obsidian. "For us, the focus is on the player experience and [allowing them] to define what their character is in that world, and how the world reacts to them."



Art director Daniel Alpert and game director Brandon Adler

down on these relationships and tie them into the main factions, giving a human face to each of these enormous entities. The goal of this, he says, is to present "a one-on-one with a person where I can really affect how they process things and react to the world. Getting into who they are, what makes them tick and what stories they're telling themselves, it's a more personal version of what's going on in the bigger world: are you going to affect the factions to change their attitude or not?"

Boyarsky speaks about these characters with infectious enthusiasm, and we're surprised to discover that companions were a last-minute addition to *Fallout*, considering how closely we now associate them with Obsidian games. The gradual deepening of this relationship over the ensuing years is emblematic of the studio's approach to sequelcraft, favouring refinement over reinvention. Such efforts require time, however, a luxury granted to the studio upon its acquisition by Microsoft. Our interviewees are unanimously enthusiastic about this relationship, citing minimal creative oversight from the parent company, along with financial stability and additional development resources. There's an undeniable irony, though, in a studio making a series critiquing megacorps being acquired by a real-world example of one, particularly when cast in the light of recent layoffs across Microsoft's gaming division.

"It was quite a shock," Boyarsky admits. "We went to work at Obsidian and, halfway through a game about corporations running everything, a giant corporation bought our studio." He laughs, and assures us that the acquisition hasn't had an impact upon the studio's creative process, nor has it jeopardised a theme he's been exploring since the '90s. "Unfortunately, power corrupting [people] has always been an issue in humanity, and I don't think it's going to change anytime soon," he says, noting how this can impact governments and religions just as easily as corporations. "We want to focus on stuff that's much more universal and less specifically tied to our time."

Obsidian has come a long way since the days of *Knights Of The Old Republic II*. With multiple large-scale projects in production simultaneously today, it could be easy for the team to lose sight of the vision established by the studio's founders over 20 years ago, particularly since its oeuvre has expanded to



As inspirations, Alpert cites Alphonse Mucha and Gustav Klimt (for the aesthetic of *Arcadia*), along with Jean 'Moebius' Giraud

incorporate *Pentiment*, Josh Sawyer's murder-mystery title set in medieval Upper Bavaria, and a foray into the survival genre with the *Grounded* series (see p68). But while acquisition and expansion have come with an influx of new faces, art director Alpert says that Obsidian's employees have remained a close-knit group throughout his time with the company. "In a lot of ways, we're still the same studio that we've always been," he says. "We have our core values: rich narrative, explorable areas, player choice. No matter what game we make or how much time or resources we have, those are foundational touchstones for everything we build."

We caught glimpses of these values in *The Outer Worlds*, in spite of its limitations. With its sequel, however, we find a studio better equipped to tackle such an ambitious assignment, poised to fully execute upon a vision rooted in Boyarsky's first forays into post-apocalyptic in *Fallout*. "Coming to Obsidian felt like coming home," he says. "We learned how to make games back at Interplay working on our RPGs. Letting the player define their experience — really giving them that control and reactivity — has been in Obsidian's DNA from the very beginning." ■

“WE’RE STILL THE SAME STUDIO. WE HAVE
OUR CORE VALUES: RICH NARRATIVE,
EXPLORABLE AREAS, PLAYER CHOICE”



TOP Expect bolder visual decisions this time around. One reference Alpert makes to an environment under a perpetual eclipse is particularly intriguing. LEFT Acquisition brought cash and resources, but Adler insists that little has changed in Obsidian's approach to development. ABOVE Science weapons lean towards the absurd, such as a firearm which shoots explosive tumours

PARKS AND EXPLORATION

Game Grounded 2
Developer Obsidian Entertainment
Publisher Xbox Game Studios
Format PC, Xbox Series
Release Out now (early access)

Where do the shrunken environs of Grounded 2 fit into Obsidian's masterplan?

As we step out into Brookhollow Park for the first time, we get goosebumps. The sound of synthesisers swells as we take in enormous grass stalks and mushrooms towering over us, while ladybirds rumble across the soil like carapaced giants. It's a moment reminiscent of Sam Neill and Laura Dern's iconic introduction to *Jurassic Park*, but merely serves as the first of many wonders we encounter during our demo of *Grounded 2*.

Just as in the first game, we take on the role of a teenager shrunk to diminutive proportions by tech corporation Omnient – this time we're exploring the park in the aftermath of an explosion. We make our way through dense jungles of suburban flora as confident teenager Hoops, stumbling across supersized artefacts of the early '90s such as an upended news camera, a milk carton and a waste bin towering impossibly high above like a skyscraper. Such pleasures were manifold in the first game, but the scope has been substantially expanded this time. Indeed, the large area we explore represents just one of several environments our chipper protagonists have to traverse. We catch a tantalising glimpse of the ice-cream tundra promised in promotional materials, for example, but are not yet able to undertake an expedition to this frozen landscape.

We appreciate the change of scenery, but a question lingers. Where does a cartoony survival game such as *Grounded 2* fit into Obsidian's ecosystem? An experimental aside from its typical fare, perhaps, or a budget-friendly alternative to blockbusters such as *The Outer Worlds 2*? When we suggest the latter to **Marcus Morgan**, vice president of operations at Obsidian, he bristles, insisting that *Grounded 2* is as much a blockbuster title as its space-venturing older sibling. He does acknowledge, however, that there are differences. "Some of the games that have more focused teams or are a little bit off the beaten path help us learn, build, grow and expand in different ways as a studio," he says, using the first *Grounded* as an example. "What does [an Obsidian] multiplayer experience look like? How could we tell more stories in a survival genre? How can we implement RPG elements?"

These changes are perhaps best represented by the Omni-Tool. This all-in-one gizmo can be upgraded to serve as a shovel, hammer, wrench



or axe in the manner of a Swiss Army Knife, eliminating the need to craft such items from scratch. This quality-of-life improvement came as a direct result of a suggestion made by Obsidian's co-developer on *Grounded 2*, Eidos Montreal. Obsidian vice president of development **Justin Britch** draws a comparison with the studio's own track record of creating sequels for other studios, experimenting within the framework of established IPs such as *South Park* and *Star Wars*. To Britch, Eidos Montreal has had a similar impact on *Grounded 2*, providing Obsidian with a fresh pair of eyes on everything from the visual fidelity of Brookhollow Park to the intricacy of the game's combat, which now incorporates dashes and heavy attacks. "Adding [Eidos] onto the *Grounded* franchise has been a creative superboost," he says.

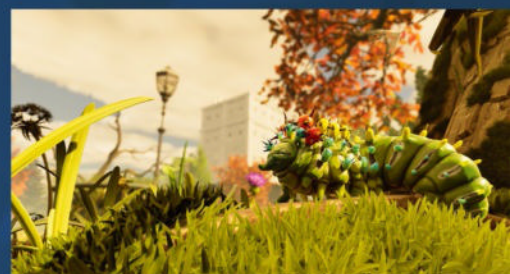
Having additional manpower can't hurt either – resources that feel most apparent in the decision to incorporate mounts in the form of insects, charmingly referred to as 'buggies'. Our quest to domesticate an ant requires us to delve deep into insect tunnel networks, gradually acquiring the resources to build a hatchery before infiltrating an ant colony to steal an egg. Once acquired, these buggies are crucial for further exploration of Brookhollow Park; we use red ant soldiers to gather materials used for building a base, and scuttle over otherwise-inaccessible webs by piloting an orb-weaver spider. "We definitely want to keep it a more accessible survival game, but we do want to age it up a bit," Morgan says. "At a high level, that concept of quirky nostalgia with a teaspoon of terror will always underpin the franchise."

Much as in the first game, however, our most memorable experiences come from the emergent chaos of this miniaturised world, whether that's being blindsided by an enormous cockroach while gathering resources or accidentally triggering a battle between rival insects while running for our life. These stressful moments are counterbalanced by more serene encounters: pitching a tent beside an idyllic pond; using a dandelion tuft to hover down from a cliff; watching a garden snail retreat inside its shell. Obsidian has matured over the five years since the early-access release of *Grounded* – with its returning protagonists having aged by two years, venturing boldly into the far-flung future of 1992 – but the principles remain in place: fine renovation rather than wild reinvention. ■



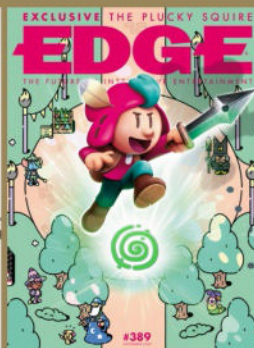
Marcus Morgan
(VP of operations)
and **Justin Britch**
(VP of development)

“WE DEFINITELY WANT TO KEEP IT
A MORE ACCESSIBLE SURVIVAL GAME,
BUT WE DO WANT TO AGE IT UP A BIT”

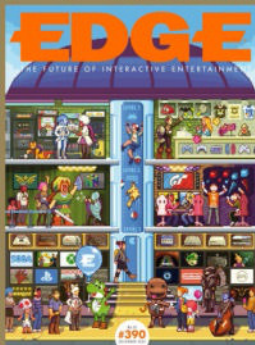
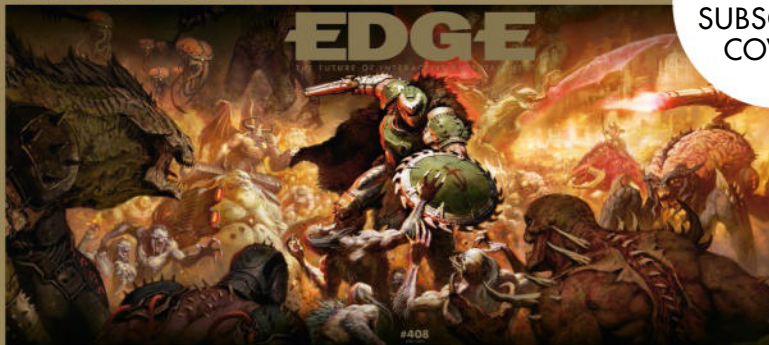


LEFT Britch draws inspiration from children's fascination with nature. ABOVE Don't be fooled by the cutesy setting. Faced with an army of bugs, crafting weapons and armour quickly becomes our biggest priority. BELOW Your first encounter with a cockroach is intended to be a shock. That feeling won't be reduced by the sight of its enormous health bar





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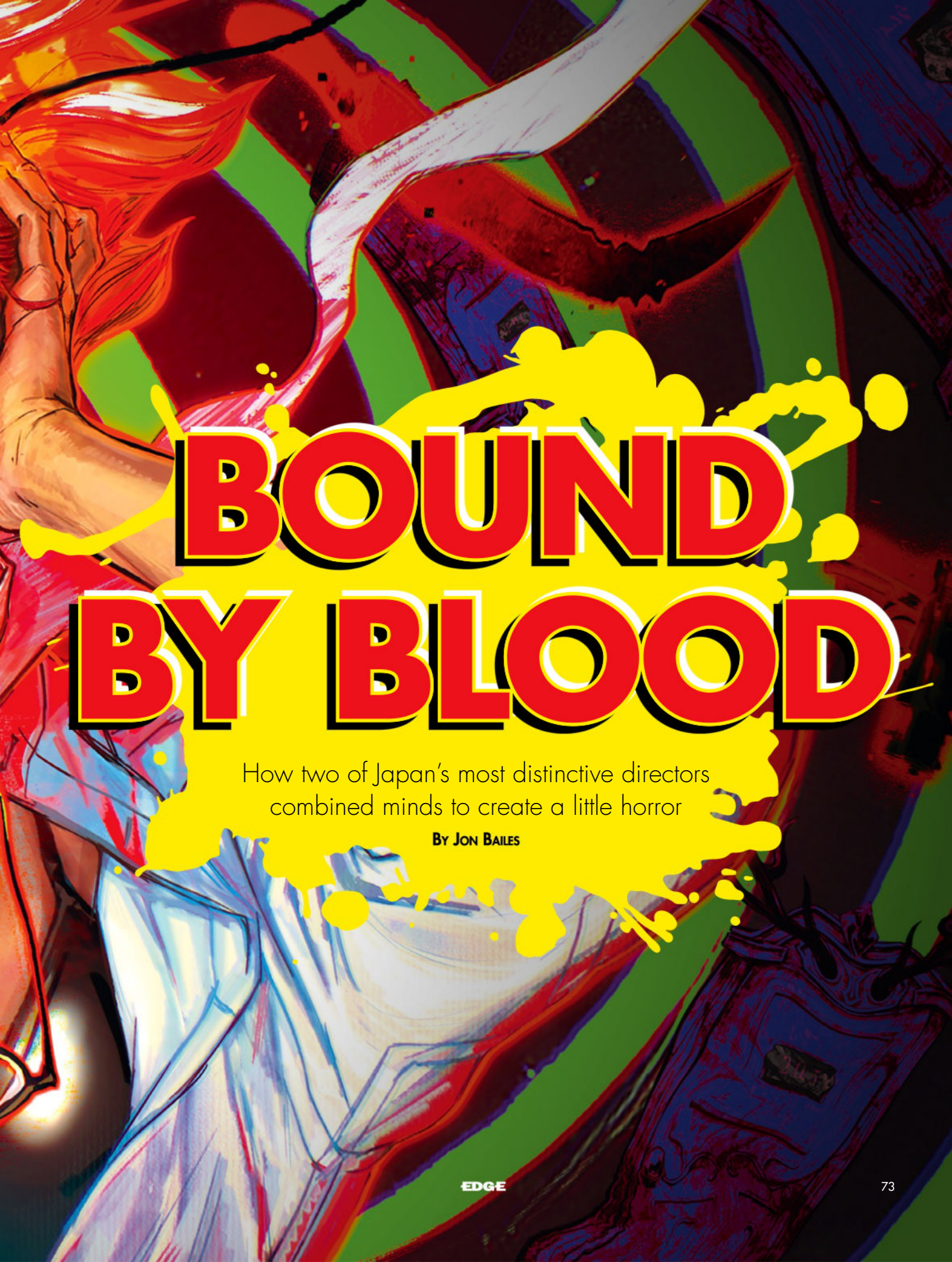
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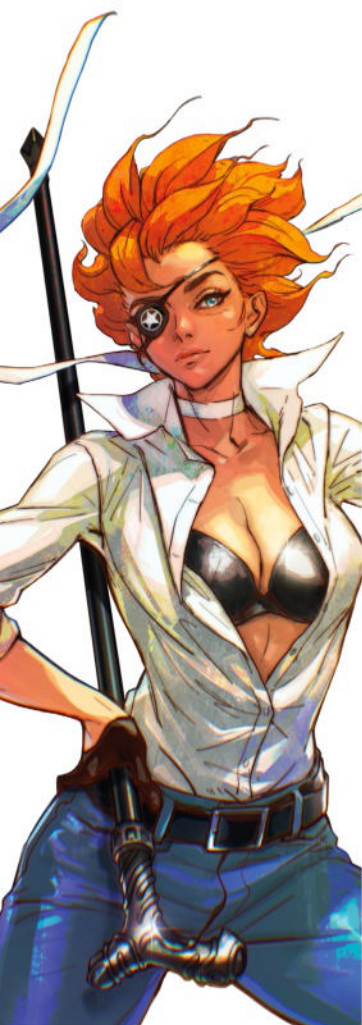
Game Hotel Barcelona
Developer White Owls
Publisher Cult Games
Format PC, PS5,
Xbox Series
Release September



BOUND BY BLOOD

How two of Japan's most distinctive directors
combined minds to create a little horror

By JON BAILES



Discussing the first collaboration between **Suda51** (Goichi Suda) and **Swery65** (Hidetaka Suehiro), we're keen to find out, in their own words, how their design philosophies compare. Asked about the similarities, Suda's answer is the more surprising, in that he plays the question unusually straight. "We come up with our own original ideas, and we always strive to take into consideration the many different possibilities a game can bring," he says. "I feel we both have really flexible imaginations." It's not an inaccurate summary – there's no denying the imagination in the likes of *Killer7* and *No More Heroes* or Swery's *Deadly Premonition* games. But it's left to the latter to give us the leftfield answer that proves the point. What's similar about their approaches? "Much blood gets spilled in our games!"

Strangely, despite talking to us separately, both then continue this theme when we ask about their differences. "I'd say the amount of blood we go for is the biggest difference," Suda says, as if taking the baton from Swery, implying his games are the bloodiest, which they undoubtedly are. "Apart from the amount of blood shown, I can't think of anything that we disagreed on," he adds. Swery gets disturbingly forensic in his response, digging into the finer points of displaying digital gore. "Suda-san's games carry an image of splattering enemies' blood in an exhilarating fashion," he says, "while I want to make the player and the main character bleed a lot. We're similar yet different in that way."

In short, they have a lot more in common than not, and that (slightly worrying) bloodlust is really only one point of overlap, a mark of their mutual, eclectic appreciation of pop culture, from the widely celebrated to the weird, tacky and extreme. That's what gave rise to *Hotel Barcelona* – the hack-and-slash Roguelike they've invented together. An overture to their love of horror films,

it's no surprise that this is a game stuffed with references to genre classics, as well as liberal lashings of red.

The first stage, for example, is a pastiche of *Friday The 13th*, complete with a boss named Jacob, a baseball-obsessed parallel to Jason Vorhees. It's set in the grounds of a camp site, as was the original film, although the enemies that accost us on the way to our showdown – machete-wielding hillbillies and rabbit-masked lunatics – feel like diversions from the theme. It matters little as we set about hacking and shooting them to bits, leaving behind trophies in the form of teeth, ears and bones, an absurd carnage that's more slapstick than genuinely grisly. Indeed, in our first few runs, we're a little surprised by how cheap the production feels. This may be aesthetically consistent with its '80s-slasher-movie inspiration, but the combat also lacks a certain 'quality' in precision and weight.

Once we die – near-inevitable in early runs – we're whisked back to the hotel, which acts as a preparation hub. Kubrick fans will instantly recognise its resemblance to the Overlook Hotel from his version of *The Shining*, a reference already given away by an intro sequence that apes the film's tracking title shot, hovering above a car as it climbs a mountain road thick with trees on either side. Inside, the decor has that telltale '70s colour scheme – oranges, purples and browns – and as you cross the lobby to spend your macabre currencies on skill hikes and stronger weapons, further iconic scenes flash to mind: weapon-dealing ranger Monica stands in front of double doors that look set to unleash a sea of blood; the bartender, Grady, waits behind a replica of the bar Jack Nicholson once leaned on and bears the name of the film's ghostly ex-caretaker. Here, Grady exchanges severed ears for other currencies.

It's a particularly American horror that's got its claws into *Hotel Barcelona*, then, and Suda and Swery have bonded over culture from across the Pacific. "Swery and I are close in age," Suda says, "and these American – and Italian – horror movies were really popular here in Japan when we were growing up. Every summer we'd get new western horror movies coming into theatres, and it was something everyone would get really excited for." Among the obvious influences, we can expect each stage to include a range of references, Swery adds. "They're built to be tastes of different subgenres of

"SUDA-SAN'S GAMES CARRY AN IMAGE OF SPLATTERING ENEMIES' BLOOD, WHILE I JUST WANT TO MAKE THE PLAYER BLEED"



TOP Goichi 'Suda51' Suda (left), founder and CEO of Tokyo's Grasshopper Manufacture, and Hidetaka 'Swery65' Suehiro, president and CEO of White Owls. ABOVE LEFT We've been left to guess at the themes and influences of some levels in the game, but the sight of an otherworldly egg is a strong hint here. ABOVE CENTRE Other than the creepy but helpful Grady, the hotel denizens include an amiable ghost named Tim, who resides in your bedroom closet. ABOVE RIGHT Animated cutscenes play their part in the game, bookending boss fights and other key developments, and helping to strengthen the narrative. LEFT Other areas around the titular hotel you'll have to survive include a fairground and the ominously named Long Pig Steakhouse, along with some more supernatural scenes



TOP A full group of phantoms of your past selves can be a formidable posse, enabling you to tear through a level with far more weapons than one person could wield alone, but it's a challenge to keep everything organised.

ABOVE The hotel is populated with a handful of helpful staff to begin with, such as the smartly uniformed Vanessa (left), as well as a handful of guests. Perhaps the two other human characters here will fit into the latter category – they certainly don't look like employees – but we've yet to meet them.

LEFT Suda and Swery come together at the MomoCon fan convention in Atlanta and take the opportunity to pose with an eager crowd

horror movies. For example, 'summer camp horror,' 'restaurant horror,' 'shark horror', and so on. The period of the late '70s to '80s was a diverse time when a lot of these subgenres were formed, so I think it has good compatibility with this game's concept."

That explains why there are animal-headed psychos in the campground, at least (perhaps they've escaped from *The Wicker Man*), and we can expect many more such odd concoctions of uncanny resemblances. Take protagonist Justine, for example. "She's a federal marshal, and her character was mainly based on Clarice Starling from *Silence Of The Lambs*," Suda explains. This is evident when you're in the hotel, where Justine cuts a demure and tentative figure, but then she morphs into a flame-haired killer once she steps outside and has to fight. That's because the Hannibal Lecter to this Starling has actually taken up residence in her mind. "For certain reasons she has this evil spirit known as 'Dr Carnival', whose name was based on 'Hannibal [Lecter]', living inside her," Suda says.

Japanese horror aficionados needn't worry that they'll be left wanting, either. Suda and Swery still both have plenty of time for media from their home country. "I'm kind of like an input monster who consumes a lot of different media, so I'll watch anything," Swery tells us. "We both watch all the major [Japanese] horror movies," Suda confirms, and says that the game will feature an appearance from *The Ring's* Sadako, and that the pair are also big fans of the 2018 film *It Comes (Kuru)*. "I feel it was one of the best Japanese horror movies that's come out in a while. We both got really into talking about it when we started making this game, so there are parts that are probably influenced by it."

With so much overlap in their interests and approaches to making games, a Suda-Swery co-production feels like a natural conclusion. If anything, it's a surprise it hasn't happened before. They first met in 2004 at E3, introduced to each other by Yasuhiro Wada, the CEO of Marvelous Entertainment, who had signed *Deadly Premonition* for distribution. The junior of the two, Swery, was quite starstruck. "At that time, I was just starting out and got so nervous, thinking, 'Wow, it's Goichi Suda'. So I was hardly able to talk to him." As their paths crossed more often, though, at the Tokyo Game Show and other events, they did get talking. "I believe that we gradually became friends," Swery says, "and developed the relationship we have today – like a master and padawan."

For years, when they met up, they would chat widely about movies, games and anime, but rarely discussed their own projects or shared ideas. "I used to play a lot of Suda-san's works," Swery says, "and we just didn't have the kind of relationship that allowed me to directly share my impressions of them." *Hotel Barcelona* thus came as a bolt from the blue, or rather from Suda, who had the game's title in mind from the start. "A few years back," Suda says, "at a talk event we did together, I commented something like, 'Let's make a game together – we'll call it *Hotel Barcelona*'. I was half-joking at the time. Then, a few months later, we ended up meeting in Banff, Canada, and I brought it up again, but this time seriously. We discussed a few ideas I'd had, decided to actually do it, and that's where it all started." Swery tells the same story, clarifying that Suda's initial proposal was made in front of the event's audience.

The game would ultimately be developed by Swery's studio, White Owls, but the two put their heads together to structure a shared vision. "After the COVID epidemic began, we were unable to meet in person," Swery says, "but still had regular discussions through video meetings to deepen our ideas." These meetings mostly focused on the characters and story, while White Owls began to build the game. "I feel like we worked together with a singleness of purpose," Swery continues, "until we reached the point where we could say, 'OK, now we just gotta create it!'" From there, Suda "kept watch over the project to make sure it achieved a proper fusion between Sudaism and Sweryism. I got a lot of advice from him regarding how to deliver the product straight to players' hearts. To me, he truly acted as a mentor, which I'm very grateful for." For his part, as overseer rather than builder, Suda seems very pleased with the result. "Swery has turned it into something that completely exceeds what I had been imagining," he says.

And there is still plenty of 'Sudaism' evident in the game. In fact, it feels more like the kind of product we would associate with Grasshopper Manufacture than the comparative slow burn of Swery's *Deadly Premonition* or *The Good Life*. But it's not as if Swery doesn't have his own pedigree in action-based experiences. "I began my career at SNK making fighting games," he reminds us, "then learned how to create action games for consoles from Tokuro Fujiwara, the legendary creator of *Ghosts 'n Goblins*. In that regard, *Hotel Barcelona* is a new challenge to me and a return to my roots." Those roots ▶

CARNIVAL GAMES

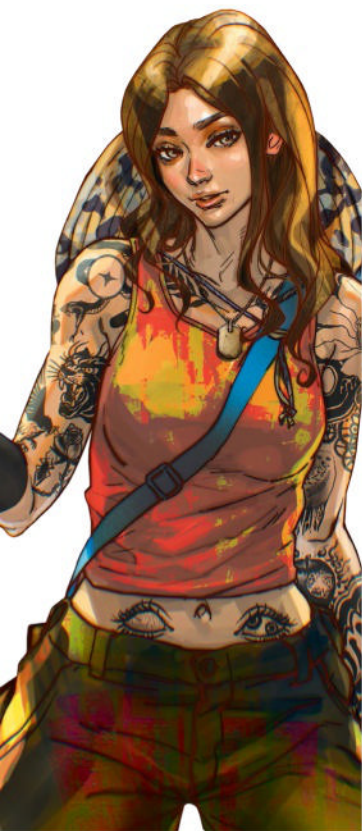
Justine's efforts to hunt serial killers around the hotel are complicated by the killer inside her own head, the ancient 'Primeval Titan' Dr Carnival. "She knows he's evil and that she can't trust him," Suda explains, "but she realizes that they need to work together." In combat, the not-so-good doctor can help directly once you've spilled enough blood to fill a skull icon at the base of the screen – unleashing his fury for a powerful special attack. Beyond the practicalities, though, Suda and Swery want to explore the repercussions of this strange relationship. "When two souls with different values take up residence in one body," Swery says, "how do they act, and how do they overcome the obstacles they face? That's the key to this story."



"I WAS JUST STARTING OUT AND GOT SO NERVOUS, THINKING, 'WOW, IT'S GOICHI SUDA'. SO I WAS HARDLY ABLE TO TALK"

AMERICAN DREAMS

Horror films are not the only US imports Suda and Swery have bonded over. Swery remembers watching the sitcoms *Full House* and *Family Ties* with his parents, before moving on to shows such as *Knight Rider* and *Miami Vice*. He also had relatives in LA and Canada, who familiarised him with North American culture. "When I create my works, a desire to recreate the atmosphere of those days naturally comes out of part of me," he says. Suda recalls a flood of American music, film and TV entering Japan in his teens. "Seeing all this grand, shiny stuff from overseas really got my blood flowing," he says. "The impact [it] had on me was pretty huge, which is why I still tend to add a lot of these influences to my games."



show in his desire to make something challenging, which people will want to play repeatedly, with no certainty that they'll succeed each time. With the modern Roguelike format, though, he recognises times have changed. "Since it's the 2020s, we didn't want to waste players' time," Swery says. "I want to give them some kind of reward for the time they spend playing. That's why I came up with the idea to make it a parody-horror Roguelike slasher." It's a means, in other words, to bridge old and new. "As long as it ends up as a game with an atmosphere like an old arcade game, I think it'll be a success."

In practice, the Roguelike elements are applied quite lightly – even permadeath can be stalled if you dip into Justine's pool of cinema-entry tickets when her health runs out, although it's a limited resource. Level layouts remain the same between runs, with changes to enemies providing the random factor – larger, harsher foes such as lumberjack axe-murderers may arrive at inopportune moments, for example. Yet there are multiple routes to a stage boss, with each level divided into sections linked by one-way doors that push you forward. Each door provides a reward when opened, such as a health refill or boost to attack speed, and since you only get five rewards before the boss, choosing wisely can make a difference.

That's far from *Hotel Barcelona*'s neatest trick, however, and after a few runs we get caught up in another layer of strategic thinking that could well elevate the game above its simple combat and platforming. In each run, Justine's progress through a level is recorded then played back as you start the next, with her previous incarnation appearing as a 'phantom' as you play. Imagine something like a ghost in a racing-game time trial, replaying your exact movements, except here phantoms continue to affect the world.

It takes a while for the potential of this feature to reveal itself. While you have no control over phantoms, their attacks hurt current enemies, so sticking close to them will often see them deal extra damage based on attacks you made in previous runs, or at least draw their attention. Changing your route through a level, meanwhile, becomes a bigger decision, since it means splitting off from your phantoms. As you gradually upgrade after each run, you may also want to think ahead, considering the phantoms you're leaving behind for a future Justine who'll have a better chance of finishing the level. Once we unlock the ability to support a trio of phantoms at once, mimicking our three prior efforts, it becomes a case of coordinating groups of runs to collate

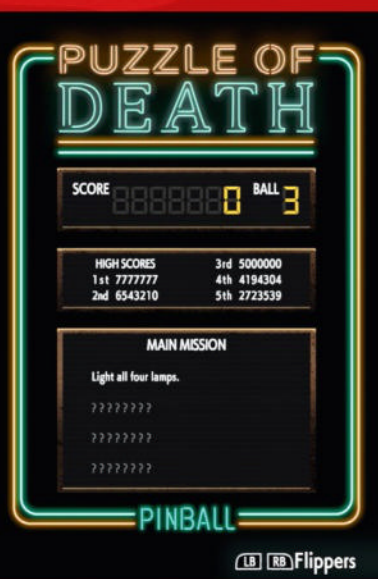
their strength. In one run, we have Justine's smart-bomb special attack charged as we start the boss battle and use it to take around a quarter of its health away. While that run fails, we're pleased to see that damage reenacted on our next try. But we're also aware that the phantom will eventually be overwritten by newer ones if we don't beat the boss soon.

At most, you'll be able to have four phantoms fighting alongside you at once, Swery explains, and he wants players to experiment with this cumulative system to craft ingenious strategies. "You could, for example, use an axe and handgun on your first run, use a knife and shotgun on your second run, then use a twin buzzsaw and flamethrower on your third run," he says. "So, upon your fourth run, the first phantom with the axe cuts down a bunch of enemies, the one with the knife finishes off the remaining ones, then the third one just keeps walking forward with the flamethrower running." The other side of this coin is that you have to keep the work rate up to keep seeing the benefits. "If you rely on phantoms too much," Swery notes, letting them do all the fighting, "you'll end up with a 'lazy phantom' for your next run."

It's here that *Hotel Barcelona* seems like it may become more than it first appears. Then again, even without such a promising mechanic to tempt us, we'd want to see more of the game, if only to discover what the minds of Suda and Swery have summoned up together. And, yes, that includes the dialled-up violence, which Suda claims isn't merely a matter of schlocky titillation. "I've always been really interested in portraying death and killing," he says. "Something that has always interested me is the psychology of people who basically live on the border between life and death – how they live their lives, how they think, why they do what they do. That's why, as silly as some of the scenarios or situations they end up in may be, I try to portray characters as closely to 'reality' as possible."

The wash of onscreen blood is unlikely to recede any time soon, then, and certainly not if these two unique yet closely aligned directors get together again. "If we both have the timing and opportunity, I'd love to do another game together with Swery," Suda says. His 'padawan' partner concurs. "If *Hotel Barcelona* is a success," Swery says, "I think it'd be good to step things up to a bigger game, or, in a more challenging, experimental vein, create a short omnibus work in VR or something. What do you think?" Us? We're just along for the ride. ■

"AS LONG AS IT ENDS UP WITH AN AN ATMOSPHERE LIKE AN OLD ARCADE GAME, I THINK IT'LL BE A SUCCESS"

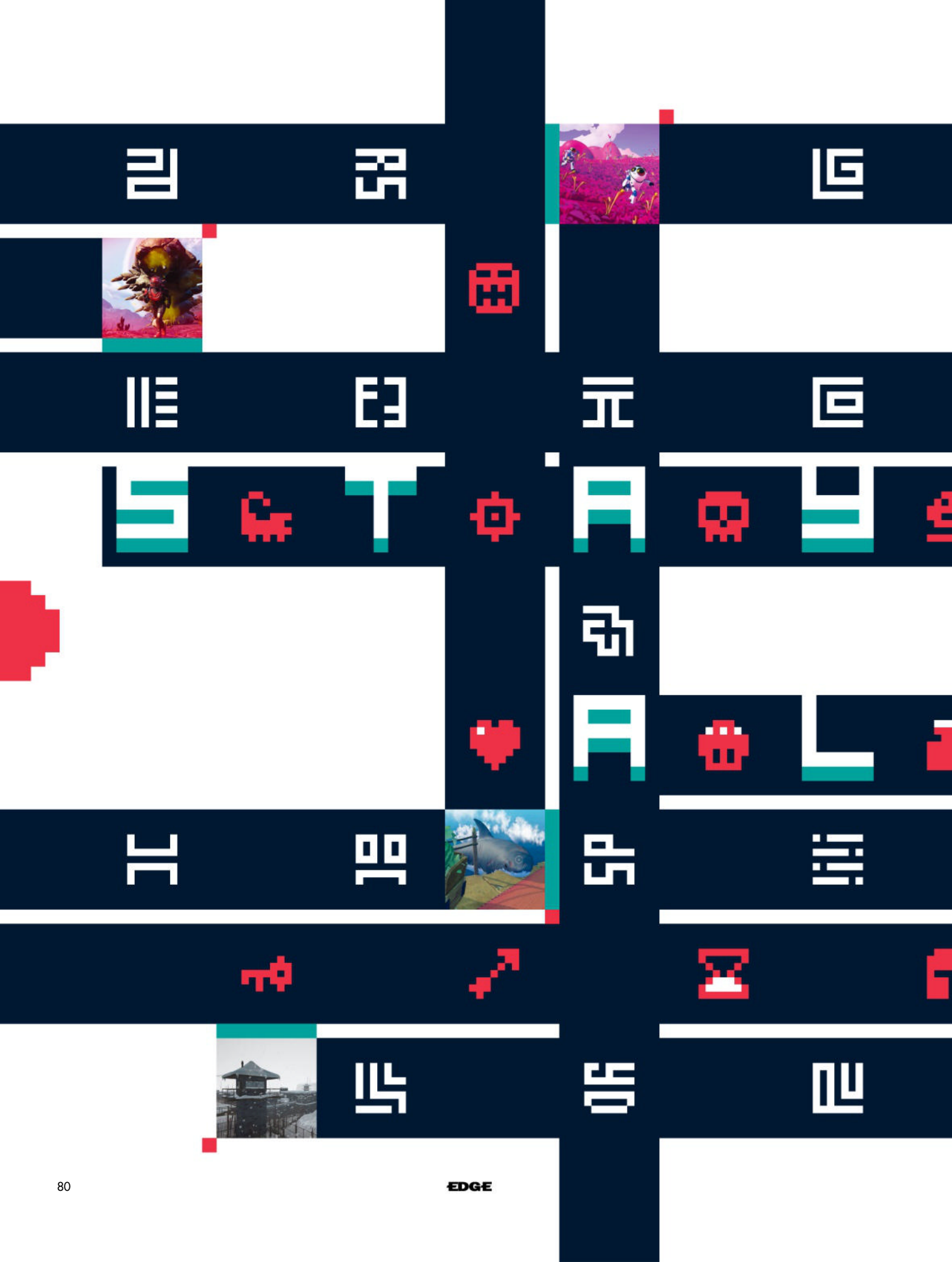


TOP Dr Carnival's attacks tend to sweep across the screen causing damage to all enemies, but you have to wait until his skull icon is filled with blood to trigger them, which means you don't get to use them often.

CENTRE LEFT Baseball diehard Jacob may be a slow opponent, but he hits hard and you have to be on your toes to deal with his range of attacks correctly – don't get distracted by the '80s-slasher-homage setting.

CENTRE RIGHT Co-op and PvP modes will feature in the finished game. 'It might be fun to invade players all over the world', the tutorial suggests. That will probably involve witnessing this outcome more frequently.

LEFT Head into the hotel bar and you'll find this morbid pinball table waiting for you – it's out of order during our demo of the game, but looks to be a fully featured machine





ince *Minecraft* first burrowed its blocky way into players' brains back in 2009, survival games have gone on to become one of the biggest genres in the medium. The idea of building a shelter and hiding in it from hostile elements and creatures has been adapted into every imaginable scenario, from the depths of the ocean in *Subnautica* to the farthest reaches of space in *No Man's Sky*.

The influence of survival games can be seen across the industry. Big-budget action-adventure titles such as *Tomb Raider* and *God Of War* have adopted elements of survival games – not least the crafting system – while you can trace a direct line from the open-ended zombie survivalism of *DayZ* to the battle-royale supremacy of *Fortnite*. Survival games have even changed how videogames, regardless of genre, are made, pioneering the early-access model of

ABOVE Like *Subnautica*, *No Man's Sky* began life as a simple exploration game, accruing more survival mechanics over time, showing the appeal of these systems. BELOW *Minecraft* is primarily responsible for popularising survival gaming, while its simultaneous function as a digital construction kit is also a key factor in the genre's trajectory



THEY TAP INTO SOME OF OUR MOST PRIMAL URGES. "WE'RE ALL LITTLE MONKEYS. EVERYONE'S LITTLE MONKEY BRAINS LIKE SHELTER AND FOOD"



development used to create outstanding recent titles such as *Hades* and *Baldur's Gate 3*.

Given survival games' ubiquity and influence, then, it might seem absurd to ask whether the genre itself might be dying. Yet as it has grown in popularity, it has also changed dramatically, resulting in a significant shift in both the appearance of games and what's prioritised in them. Consequently, it's possible that survival games are not only dying, but they've reached the brink of extinction without anyone actually noticing.

To examine this notion, it's important to specify what exactly survival games are, and the forces behind their appeal and popularity. Typically, survival games deposit you in a wilderness such as a forest, then challenge you to not die for an unspecified amount of time. At the most basic level, this involves managing various bodily needs such as hunger and thirst (usually represented by gradually decaying meters) by foraging for sources of food and water. Most survival games also allow you to improve your fortunes by crafting tools such as axes, spears and fishing rods, and constructing a shelter where you can store your equipment and hide from wandering creatures and environmental hazards.

The specifics vary between games, but all survival games share the same fundamental draw. **Anthony Gallegos**, design director on *Subnautica 2*, perhaps sums it up best with an anecdote. "I used to work at this one Marvel studio, and we had some coworkers that would occasionally bring their kids to work," he tells us. He recalls seeing one of these children playing *Astroneer*, a game about constructing bases and outposts on colourful alien worlds. "I was watching this little kid play, and I was like, 'Oh, geez, good luck, kid, that game has no onboarding'. I came back two hours later, and he had made a base that was leaps and bounds above anything I could have fathomed for myself. I was like, 'OK, either this kid's a genius, or survival-game mechanics are just simple enough that they're universally approachable'."

Gallegos believes that the popularity of survival games derives from how they tap into some of our most primal urges. "We're all little monkeys. Everyone's little monkey brains like shelter and food," he says. In other words, just as

children build dens in forests and blanket forts in their bedrooms, survival games enable us to simulate the satisfaction of pitting ourselves against the imagined elements.

But this isn't the only reason survival games are so popular. Gallegos has observed that players who discover their appeal also develop an insatiable appetite for them. "There are a lot of genres where players are very monogamistic. A lot of players are like, 'I only play this shooter'," he says. "MMOs, same way. When all the MMOs were trying to copy *World Of Warcraft*, people were like 'I'll go play the first free month of it, and then I'm coming back to WOW'."

Survival games, Gallegos believes, are different, as in most cases the vast majority of players don't make a long-term commitment to a single experience. "If I see people play through all the content of *Subnautica* and then they leave for a little bit until we do a content patch, that doesn't alarm me, because I know what they're doing," he explains. "They just move from one to [another] with their friends, or by themselves. But they play them all."

When this behaviour started is unclear. What's fascinating, though, is that the original *Subnautica* is both the product of players' ravenous appetite for survival games and one of the chief architects of the genre's proliferation. Although it came to be one of the most acclaimed survival games, Unknown Worlds' aquatic adventure was not originally conceived as one. "It was an exploration game first, and then they added survival elements," Gallegos explains. "Charlie [Cleveland], the original creator, if you asked him about it, I think he would tell you that he listened to the community to figure out what they wanted."

Yet in reworking *Subnautica* into a survival game based on community demand, Cleveland established a template for a new kind of survival game, one that took the genre from its (relatively) grounded origins into the realms of infinite fantasy. Early progenitors such as *Minecraft*, *The Forest*, *DayZ* and *Project Zomboid* may all have featured fantastical elements such as zombies and monsters, but their environments all looked like the real world and (more or less) functioned according to real-world logic. If you needed to craft something out of wood, for example, you went ▶



Drive harder

Seth Rosen left Ironwood Studios following the release of *Pacific Drive*, but he had toyed with ideas for a sequel. "The idea I was most excited about was to have it be more of a road-trip game," he says. "The sequel would open with: 'Welcome to outside of the Zone – now you have to drive across the whole of America to reach somewhere in Florida, as the anomalies are taking over the entire country'. There's something about the grand scale and a single, undirected quest that connects with me."



2013 wilderness survival game *Don't Starve* was a key inspiration for *Pacific Drive*, which is chiefly why Rosen was brought onto the project

and chopped down a tree. If you needed to cook, you built a campfire or a furnace.

In contrast, *Subnautica* transposed the fundamentals of survival to an alien ocean world with a unique ecosystem, one in which the lessons learned in those early survival games no longer worked. Instead, players had to master a new set of rules to thrive in the game's planetwide ocean. They would learn how to manage their oxygen, which oceanic creatures were edible, and how to craft items in a world without wood.

In this way, *Subnautica* demonstrated how a radical change of setting could revitalise survival gaming's underlying ruleset. It's an idea survival games have been riffing on ever since, using setting and theme to recontextualise the underlying mechanics. Examples that have adopted *Subnautica*'s template include the spacefaring survival sim *Breathedge*, post-apocalyptic airship game *Forever Skies* and Obsidian Entertainment's *Grounded*, which combines survival gaming with a theme inspired by the film *Honey, I Shrunk The Kids*.

One particularly vivid example from recent years is *Abiotic Factor*, a cooperative survival game that casts you as a scientist attempting to sustain yourself within a Black Mesa-inspired research facility. *Abiotic Factor*'s design director, **Geoff Keene**, had attempted to break into the survival genre during its early years with the ill-fated zombie survival game *The Dead Linger*. "It was a survival game back when we were like, 'The zombie genre has died – we're bringing it back to life,'" he says. But Keene's inexperience led to a troubled development, while *The Dead Linger* also struggled to stand out amid a slew of zombie-themed games. "I was young. We didn't know how to make games back then." Keene went on to develop the social deduction game *Unfortunate Spacemen* before spending some time at *DayZ* creator Dean Hall's studio, RocketWerkz. But he was still determined to build a survival game of his own, eventually cofounding Deep Field Games with several friends to create *Abiotic Factor*.

A core inspiration here was the opening tram ride in *Half-Life* and its second expansion, *Blue Shift*, occurring before Gordon Freeman triggers the resonance cascade that dooms the facility. "I just love that little slice of life," Keene says.



Anthony Gallegos,
design director,
Subnautica 2

"Who lives there? Who's doing the stuff there?" He imagined a scenario in which you had to survive for a longer period in Black Mesa, living off food pulled from vending machines and building equipment out of the furniture. "That was the original idea. I want trams, and I want vending machines, and I want lab coats."

Though *Abiotic Factor* is a survival game, only its base mechanics derive from genre norms, with everything else designed to fit its theme. Its setting, the GATE research facility, is structured to reflect Black Mesa's warren of corridors, with excursions into Xen-style portal worlds where you can discover strange new resources. The crafting system, meanwhile, is designed to make you feel like you're inventing the items you create, reflecting your in-game role as a brainy boffin. "Our marketing producer, she came up with an idea for a minigame that was sort of based on Wordle," Keene says. "We made this little prototype of moving the items into the slot to make the item. You're given six or eight items or something, and you have to guess which ones are used in the recipe."

Abiotic Factor's scientific survivalism shows how *Subnautica* opened the floodgates to what's possible in the survival space. But as such there's one big difference between the wider effects they had, in using unusual themes to their advantage. *Subnautica*'s underwater world made it a pioneer, whereas *Abiotic Factor*'s approach is now the baseline a survival game must meet to stand out.

Indeed, according to Keene, the perception of survival games as a robust, enduringly popular genre is built on the skeletons of countless examples that are released into immediate obscurity. "Most survival games go nowhere, right?" he says. "They release and get 100 reviews on Steam, if they're lucky, and then they just fall off the map." Because of this, one of the key thrusts of *Abiotic Factor*'s development was to steer clear of ideas or motifs that made it resemble a traditional survival game. "I basically avoided anything that makes survival games a real grind – looking at the ground, picking up sticks," he says. "I think a lot of them fall into that trap where they're like, 'Well, we've got the wood chopping, we've got the picking up sticks and stones, we've got the crafting...' You've got to do something different with it."

Scavenger's brain

Rosen has considered ways to breathe life into survival gaming. One idea he had blended *Outer Wilds* with *Scavenger's Reign*, Netflix's animated show about survivors on an alien planet. "In the world of *Scavenger's Reign*, everything has this secondary use. There are fish you can pick up and put on your face and use as a rebreather," he says. He imagines a game that takes "the environmental puzzle aspect of *Outer Wilds*, but makes it about the objectives that populate the world, rather than the rules of the planets."



Abiotic Factor was meant to be a quick project – Deep Field Games expected it to be in early access within six months. "That's a big joke now," Keene says



Gallegos agrees that developers of survival games can no longer rely on the basic tree chopping and campfire building that popularised the genre. "At the very least, you need a strong theme," he says. But he also points out that the priorities of survival games have shifted more broadly. For example, modern survival games either heavily support or outright mandate cooperative multiplayer play. *Abiotic Factor* already includes this while *Unknown Worlds* is bringing co-op play to *Subnautica 2*. "We have certain mechanics where, if I hit my air [bladder] in singleplayer, it gives me oxygen. If I hit it when I'm standing next to you, it gives us both oxygen," Gallegos says. In addition, he states that modern survival games are increasingly averse to challenging or punishing players, with death and setbacks treated as an inconvenience to enjoyment. "Survival games often make you want to do anything but lose. You're like, 'I will hoard everything for food. I don't ever want to die. I don't ever want to lose. I will save scum'."

And this brings us to why, despite appearances, survival games may be an endangered species. In the effort to diversify, developers might just have forgotten what they're supposed to be about.

This is the view of **Seth Rosen**, a freelance game design consultant and director who has overseen the development ►



MAIN *Subnautica* diverted from *Minecraft*'s template by having a handcrafted rather than procedurally generated world.

TOP Relatively few games have sought to replicate *DayZ*'s truer survival experience. Its legacy is mainly as a multiplayer shooter.

ABOVE *Forever Skies* is a good example of how heavily modern survival games rely on crafting and exploration – and what happens when these aren't done right

"MOST SURVIVAL GAMES GO NOWHERE, RIGHT? THEY RELEASE AND GET 100 REVIEWS ON STEAM, IF THEY'RE LUCKY, AND THEN THEY FALL OFF THE MAP"



STAYING ALIVE



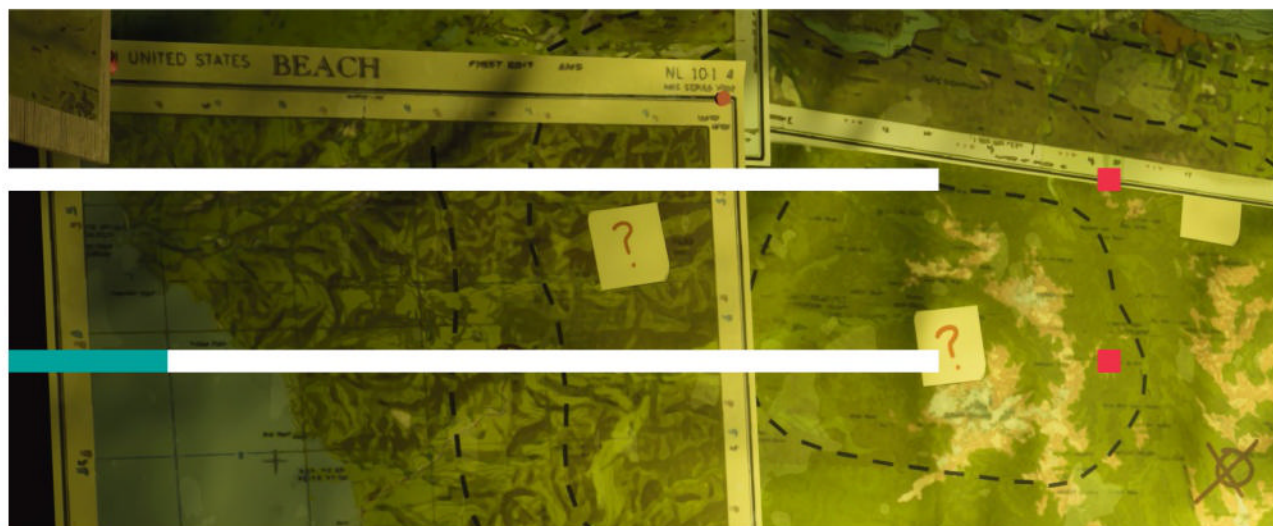
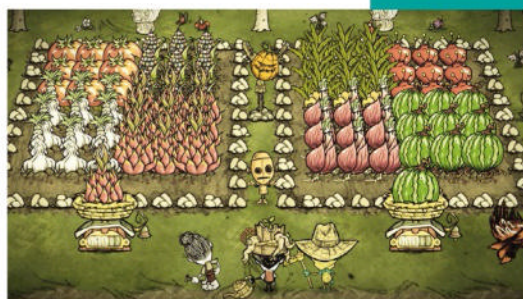
Geoff Keene, design director, *Abiotic Factor*

of numerous survival games, including *Don't Starve Together* (the multiplayer expansion to Klei Entertainment's 2013 hit) and last year's *Pacific Drive*. "The vast majority of games we call survival games, I think, could more accurately be described as co-op base-building RPGs," he says. "The fact that it's sort of dressed up as survival and you have a hunger meter is just tacking onto what's hot in the market."

Rosen qualifies his position by pointing out that he personally doesn't like the survival genre, despite having designed two games that would conventionally fall into the category. "For me, survival games tend to be two things. One is a mystery box in terms of there's all this stuff and you've got to figure out how it works in the world, so you are poking things with sticks and seeing what they do," he explains. "And it's also a collect-a-thon. It's a crafting and resource-gathering experience, and that's most of what we're doing moment to moment. And I just find it ultimately pretty tedious."

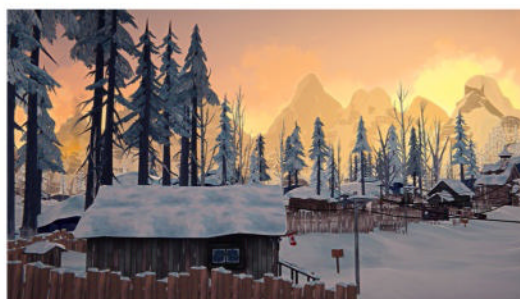
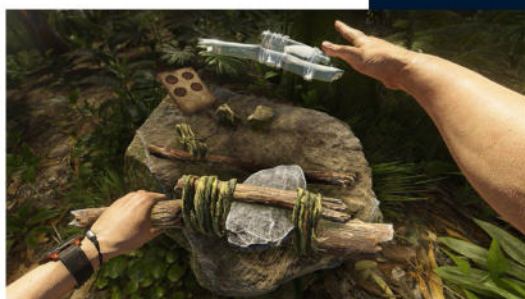
Within this nebula of crafting and base-building RPGs, Rosen says there are "vanishingly few" true survival experiences. "When I think of survival, the word, and movies

RIGHT+BELOW *Don't Starve* was a fairly traditional survival game, but expansions that added multiplayer and odd environments mimic the trajectory of survival games toward cooperative RPGs. MAIN *Pacific Drive's* Olympic Exclusion Zone is inspired by *STALKER: Shadow Of Chernobyl*



"I THINK BACK TO RESIDENT EVIL 1 AND 2, AND HOW HILARIOUSLY SPARSE AMMUNITION WAS. THAT FEELS A LOT MORE LIKE SURVIVAL TO ME"

RIGHT While *Abiotic Factor*'s research facility is primarily inspired by *Half-Life*, its portal worlds draw from shooters such as *Unreal* and *Quake*.
 BELOW *Green Hell* simulates the hazards of the jungle. You even have to check your body for parasites, leeches and worms.
 BELOW RIGHT *The Long Dark* provides perhaps the best representation of a disaster's impact on a survival situation



that are about survival, it's about a character finding themselves against great odds, often in some difficult climate or terrain or strange world that they don't understand, and they have limited resources." Examples of 'true' survival games by that definition include Creepy Jar's jungle-based *Green Hell* and Hinterland Studio's uncompromising arctic excursion *The Long Dark*. In both games, staying alive is nearly always your primary concern, and the environmental hazards you face, such as extreme cold or wild predators, are a constant threat to your continued existence.

But the trajectory of the modern survival genre, in which modes of play such as exploration, creativity and cooperation have been increasingly emphasised, has deliberately reduced much of this friction. "Especially in the multiplayer variants of these things," Rosen points out, "if you die, the penalty is you have to walk back to your backpack. That's not survival at that point – that's adventuring."

As Gallegos observes, many modern survival games perceive the fundamental challenge and busywork of survival as an inconvenience, and there are far more egregious examples of this than the likes of *Subnautica* and *Abiotic Factor*, both of which require you to take risks and plan expeditions to improve your situation. Games such as Redbeet Interactive's *Raft* enable you to take your entire base with you on adventures, so stepping out for food or other resources demands little forethought.

For Rosen, then, there are many games outside the survival genre that better embrace the ideas it is notionally about, including survival-horror examples. "I think back to *Resident Evil 1* and *2*, and how hilariously sparse ammunition was. That feels a lot more like survival to me." He also points to 2019's *Outer Wilds*, and how it challenged players to figure out how its solar system worked in order to escape its

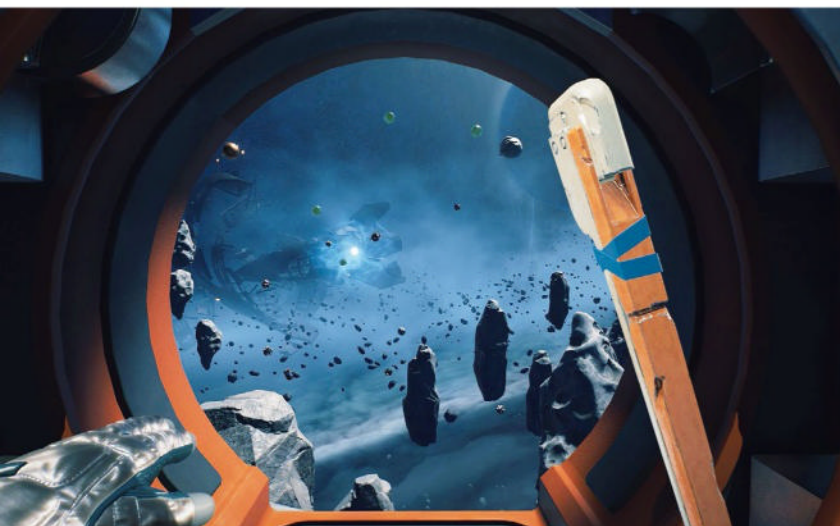
time-loop apocalypse that occurred every 22 minutes. "*Outer Wilds* is more of a survival game than a lot of what we call survival games," he says. "For a lot of people, it's really satisfying and gratifying to make progress in the tech tree, and improve your walls from wood to stone or whatever. But that's not survival at that point. That's frontiering."

It's worth noting that Rosen's view of how we wrongly categorise survival games extends to his own work. Rosen doesn't consider *Pacific Drive* to be a true survival game either. "I think of it much more as a car-maintenance adventure than a survival game," he says. "A lot of our challenges were about figuring out how to put the player into duress mode when they're behind the wheel of a car, which has to protect you to a degree, but also you need to care about the state of your car and maintain it."

That said, *Pacific Drive* does incorporate many of Rosen's design ideas about how to engender survivalist instincts in a virtual space. *Pacific Drive* is all about managing your fuel, your tyres, the overall integrity of your car, and doing so in an environment where there are hazards that can and will harm you. It's a game that is willing to get in your way, and interrupt what you want to do with more urgent tasks that you need to do. "If you boil it down, the vast majority of what's going on in *Pacific Drive* is time management or attentional management," Rosen says. "The emotion that is elicited by having to do time management when there are stakes is that fight-or-flight, 'dynamic problem solving under duress' feeling that you get from actual survival."

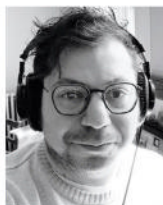
Refocusing survival games on actual survival will not be easy. For starters, it doesn't appear to be what the majority of players want. But in addition to this, making a true survival game that's also enjoyable is very difficult. In ►





LEFT *Breathedge* is an infusion of comedy into a *Subnautica*-like survival adventure.

BELOW *Grounded* is an example of how theme can refresh a survival game, and also how roleplaying mechanics have overwhelmed the genre's original nature



Seth Rosen, game design consultant

their traditional formulation, survival games are built upon a very simple set of systems, namely one or several timers that tick down until they kill the you unless you're able to restore them by some means. Every other system commonly associated with survival games – crafting, base building – is supplementary.

This is what makes survival games so adaptable. You can add these systems into virtually any other type of game, just as Cleveland did with the original *Subnautica*. But the passive nature of these mechanics also means that making a game specifically about survival is tough, hence why they so often exist beneath other, more interactively immediate mechanics such as crafting and building, and why those mechanics have become more prioritised over time.

With that in mind, what does the future hold for survival games? Rosen believes that bringing survival back to the fore requires better delineation between survival games and crafting/base-building RPGs, though he acknowledges there are obstacles. "I've been working on a talk about all of this, and one of the things I keep trying to fit into it is this new taxonomy for how to talk about these kinds of games," he says. "But it's so multivalent, and it so often multiplies even within a single title, that I found it really

hard to nail down the thing, which I think is why we get this umbrella term of 'survival games'."

Keene, however, thinks the opposite, that survival games will only thrive if they continue to mix with other genres. "I would say there needs to be more hybridisation," he says. "I think it's detrimental to survival games to keep trying to copy other survival games. They really need to step out and do more things with it."

Gallegos, meanwhile, falls somewhere between the two. He predicts survival games will become even more focused upon multiplayer, likely taking inspiration from viral hits in the cooperative horror space. "Survival games will increasingly lean into more social mechanics over time," he says, "learning the lessons from major successes like *REPO* and *Content Warning*, and looking at the ways people play together."

This is something Unknown Worlds plans to pursue with *Subnautica 2*. "In the original version of the prototype, I could stand in the doorway to the big sub and block it and just watch you drown. I would do stuff like that all the time, where they'd be like, 'Let me in', and I'd be like, 'What's the password?'" he says. "We got rid of that for now, but I think we'll be finding ways to bring stuff like that in, ways you can lightly mess with each other, like if we added a mechanic where, when you're swimming to the surface, you could grab someone's ankle and use it to pull yourself past them."

But Gallegos doesn't believe this means survival games will necessarily stray further from their origins. Instead, the right kind of hybridisation could reinstate the tension of survival to the genre. He points to the recently released co-op indie *Peak* as an example. "It's a climbing game, but you only have a stamina bar," he says. "If you take health damage, it impacts your stamina bar. If you're hungry, it slowly impacts your stamina bar even more. So you eat to get it back to where it was. You heal yourself to get your stamina back. That's a brilliant way to tie all these survival systems into [one] thing the player cares about."

Gallegos also points out that Unknown Worlds plans to elaborate upon the basic survival systems *Subnautica 2* will

EDITORIAL NOTE
Our interview with Anthony Gallegos took place before the recent upheavals at Unknown Worlds and the departure of Charlie Cleveland



Alpha mail

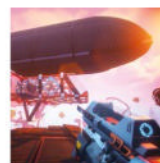
Early-access development has long been the de facto way to make survival games. But expectations of what 'early access' means have changed in the past decade, with games such as *Hades* being released in an almost-complete 'alpha' state. Keene says this change in expectations can be mitigated. "You've got to have somebody looking six months ahead, saying, 'What's so and so working on? How are we going to get to that point from here? How are we going to plan that?' And you extrapolate that out to however many years."





initially launch with. Appropriately, one of the sequel's central themes is adaptation, with players altering their characters at a genetic level to better thrive in its underwater world. Some upgrades will give players access to new areas of the world, while others, planned for the future, will enable them to customise their characters in more specific ways.

But, coming full circle, the extent of these adaptations will depend on how *Subnautica 2*'s community responds to them. "We're definitely going to push our systems over time, but I think we're going to push them more in the terms of [how] hunger will play into this progression system, [or] thirst will play into that progression system. But reinventing those entirely? I'm not sure," Gallegos says. "We'll have to see. If the fans, in our case, really want us to push it, we will." Survival, after all, is a matter of understanding the environment you exist in. And sometimes the best way to do that, ironically, is to evolve into a different kind of beast. ■



MAIN *No Man's Sky*'s survival and base-building systems are at odds with its futuristic wanderlust. BELOW LEFT *Astroneer* was conceived as a stress-free experience, showing how the genre has changed; *Raft*'s portable base feels like a step forward for the genre, but in many ways it is a step back

W R T



"I WOULD SAY THERE NEEDS TO BE MORE HYBRIDISATION. IT'S DETRIMENTAL TO SURVIVAL GAMES TO KEEP TRYING TO COPY OTHER SURVIVAL GAMES"



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



DYNASTY WARRIORS: ORIGINS

Going all the way back to the
beginning for a fresh start

By **CHRIS SCHILLING**

Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series
Developer Omega Force
Publisher Koei Tecmo
Origin Japan
Release 2025

There is something if not heartwarming then at least reassuring about the durability of *Dynasty Warriors*. For years misunderstood and frequently lambasted by western critics as a shallow button-masher, the Musou formula endures. Since the turn of the millennium, when the series' second entry established what Omega Force producer **Tomohiko Sho** calls "the essence of *Dynasty Warriors* – that exhilarating feeling of one versus 1,000", it has withstood the caprices of an industry in perpetual flux. In doing so, it has become an endearing constant, a testament both to staying true to one's ideals and to sustainability rather than the pursuit of endless growth.

Yet as any good general knows, sometimes it pays to mix up your strategy, lest your opponents find your approach all too predictable. Indeed, given the increasing costs of game development, there's perhaps now a greater urgency to expand the series' audience beyond its loyal fanbase (its critical reception may have been warmer in recent years, but Sho has said that it's still "not yet in a position to be called a success in the west"). Shifting tack doesn't always pay off, however. When 2018's *Dynasty Warriors 9* appeared to usher in a new era for the series, with a sprawling open world and stealth elements, the result was not universally praised. "We did receive a lot of positive and negative comments," Sho says, choosing his words carefully. "It was kind of on the fence in terms of that."

It would be natural, then, to assume *Dynasty Warriors: Origins* was developed as a direct reaction to that mixed response, but Sho says that couldn't be further from the truth. "The direction was not influenced at all by *Dynasty Warriors 9* or the fans' reactions," he insists. "It's really a result of starting completely from scratch, and what we considered that *Dynasty Warriors* should be in the present day." Internally, he says, *Origins* was never viewed as a spinoff, but rather made "with the intent of having it as a reboot of the series."

As such, that meant going back to the very start — not to 2000, nor three years earlier when *Dynasty Warriors* was a one-on-one fighter, but to the second century AD, when Luo Guanzhong's classic work of literature,



Did the combat mechanics inform the lithe design of the hero, or vice versa? Yoshida says it was "a little bit of both"

The Romance Of The Three Kingdoms, begins. "I really wanted to be able to convey the story and the appeal of the Three Kingdoms to people worldwide," Sho explains, lending credence to the idea that Omega Force feels the need to welcome new players to the fold. "Especially

"I REALLY WANTED TO BE ABLE TO CONVEY THE STORY AND THE APPEAL OF THE THREE KINGDOMS"

because there are so many people around the world who aren't familiar with this story. We thought that it would be best to allow them the opportunity to carefully experience the story from the very beginning through this game."

That in turn led to a courageous design choice, particularly for a series as obdurate as this. Among the many things you can rely on in a *Warriors* game is a sizeable playable roster; from numbered entries to series crossovers, you are never short of options when picking a character to command. For *Origins*, however, Omega Force opted for a single lead: a young 'guardian of the peace' with no name and memory, who instead befriends the various generals and officers with whom fans have grown familiar over the years and assists them on the battlefield.

So what made that the right approach for this game? "This answer is a bit related to the

previous one, because really the main reason for this approach is that it allows players to enjoy the Three Kingdoms story deeply from scratch," Sho begins. In what way? "The Three Kingdoms is both based on Chinese history as well as an ensemble drama. And so for those that are completely new to it, to be able to really understand the allure or the charm of the story, it tends to take a lot of time." Casting you as an amnesic lead, he says, ensures that perspectives align — you organically discover more about the world and those fighting for control of it alongside the protagonist you're controlling. Even so, surely there were concerns about this approach within the studio? "At least for me, there was never really any hesitation or doubt in choosing this direction," Sho says. "I really had conviction in terms of being able to come up with this direction."

One of the main results of that shift is that it feels like you get to know these historical characters better, especially away from the battlefield. Instead of upgrading their skills, you develop your character's relationship with them in conversations that, perhaps surprisingly, delve into their doubts and vulnerabilities. Art director **Shunya Yoshida** says he was inspired by Sho's own conviction in this direction to flesh out these characters in his designs, making characters with seemingly superhuman powers feel more, well, human. "The direction of Shosan really gave me the confidence to go forward in this without any doubt," he begins. "So I thought I could really go deep — a lot deeper than I had done in the past. With the characters, I was not only able to incorporate all the positive aspects from previous games, but also to focus on just the individual — the way that they're acting and reacting, as well as their overall presence in the game."

The effect is oddly wholesome in places, as you witness these mighty warriors talking very honestly and openly with one another. That's partly a result of winnowing down the roster so that, in Sho's words, "we could really thoroughly explore and portray the charm of each hero", though he modestly says he "gave just a rough, general direction for this" and credits director Kazutoshi Sekiguchi and the game's writers for running with it: "Ultimately, it is thanks to the

hard work of the director and the scenario team that this was able to come about."

Yet there is one particular figure here whose softer side hasn't been exposed; if anything, his edges have been deliberately sharpened. We're talking, of course, about Lu Bu, whose infrequent appearances are a highlight — his first, in particular, where you're actively encouraged to run away rather than confront him, showcases his devastating strength. As such, a character who had lost some of his initial fear factor over the course of the series has well and truly regained his mojo, and Sho acknowledges this. "With each game, we would think that we'd created the strongest Lu Bu, but the reaction from the players — 'No, that's not quite it' — showed that we hadn't. So this time we went all out to make sure that he is the strongest in the series. And I think his visuals also portray that aspect as well." Yoshida duly takes his cue. "It was a very fun challenge for me," he nods. "And not just his visual design — we wanted to be able to get that feeling of fear from his motion alone, and we were really happy to be able to successfully achieve that this time around."

By Lu Bu's second appearance, you should be better acquainted with the game's more sophisticated combat systems, which is useful because you'll need to have understood, if not mastered, the newly introduced dodge, parry and fortitude mechanics to topple this powerful opponent. It's not a FromSoftware boss fight exactly, but it comes closer than you'd ever have dared expect from a *Warriors* game. Sho rather pointedly says he's been asked a lot whether Omega Force took inspiration from elsewhere, adding that there were no individual systems influenced by other games ("at least that I'm aware of"). But he is conscious of an overall rise in standards — and, concomitantly, audience demands — and is keen to ensure his studio is equipped to keep up. "We look to other games not for anything specific but when we want to push ourselves further." Sho suggests that has involved looking inwards, too, drawing upon "the knowledge we've gained from action and action-RPG titles we've developed under the Omega Force brand."

It helped that his team was working on more capable hardware. What's striking about *Origins* is that it feels like it captures the kind of epic scale for which the developers have always been

Q&A

Tomohiko Sho
Producer

There are nine officers you can temporarily control on the battlefield — how did you decide which ones should be playable?

Since it's about the Three Kingdoms, we decided that we wanted to really focus on the key characters of the story. So there's Cao Cao, Sun Jian and Liu Bei. And we also want to represent each kingdom evenly, so we decided to go with three characters from each of the three factions who later formed the Three Kingdoms. On top of that, we took into consideration the differentiation with weapon types and actions. And in addition to that, since the story itself goes from the Yellow Turban Rebellion to the Battle Of Chibi, we wanted to select officers who played an important role in that story as well.

You spoke before the game's release about returning to tactical action. There's certainly a more evident focus on tactical elements here, but do you plan to lean even further into that side in future entries?

Yes, I do believe that the tactical aspects will continue to be explored further, though we're not strictly looking at strengthening the tactical elements for their own sake, but to enhance the immersive atmosphere of the battle. So I think this is something that we'd like to continue to look at and go even deeper into.



striving, that technology has finally caught up with that original vision. Without going into specifics, Sho alludes to features that "were originally developed during *Dynasty Warriors 6*" that could only be "presented with current technology", but again prefers to credit his team for finally realising them. "I am the producer — I can say a lot of things as to how I want the vision to be, but it really was the development staff. They really did work hard to envision something we haven't been able to do before, and I'm very grateful to them."

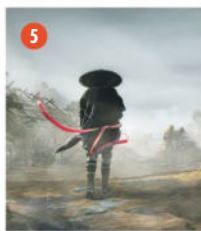
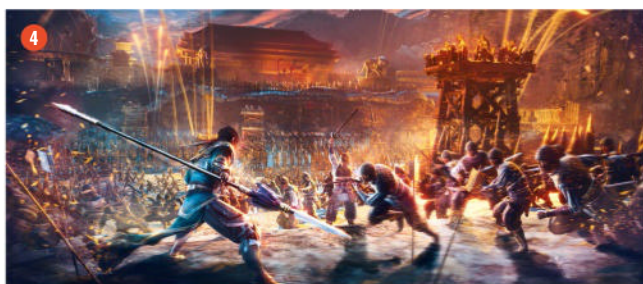
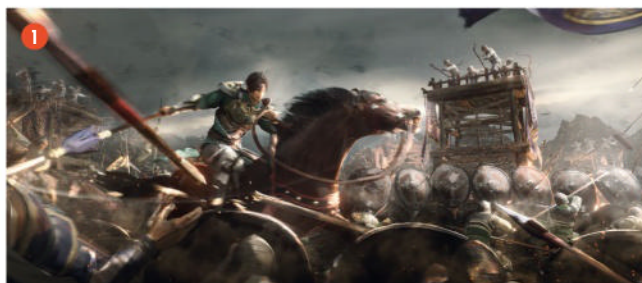
Sho gestures to his younger colleague, who adds that it wasn't just a matter of additional horsepower. "I agree that a lot of it was to do with the technology, but even though we want to have a lot of soldiers on the screen, just having that doesn't really give you that feel of being in a battlefield," Yoshida says. "We wanted to give you that sense of armies really going at each other. Realising that was the result of a lot of effort from all the staff members."

That scale can be felt elsewhere, too, via an overworld map that resembles the field screen of an RPG, giving you a greater sense of both the geography of the world and how the conflict is affecting it. "One of the major reasons for including the map of China was to let players feel the massive size of the kingdom stage, but also we believed it was necessary to allow [the] player to really feel immersed into the story and the world itself," Sho says. Somewhat surprisingly, he admits that it wasn't until midway through development that it came in — until then, the player mostly navigated between bases and battlefield via traditional in-game menus. "The narrative team, even though it was late in development, really strongly felt that it was something that we should do in the game, and so we made it happen," he says.

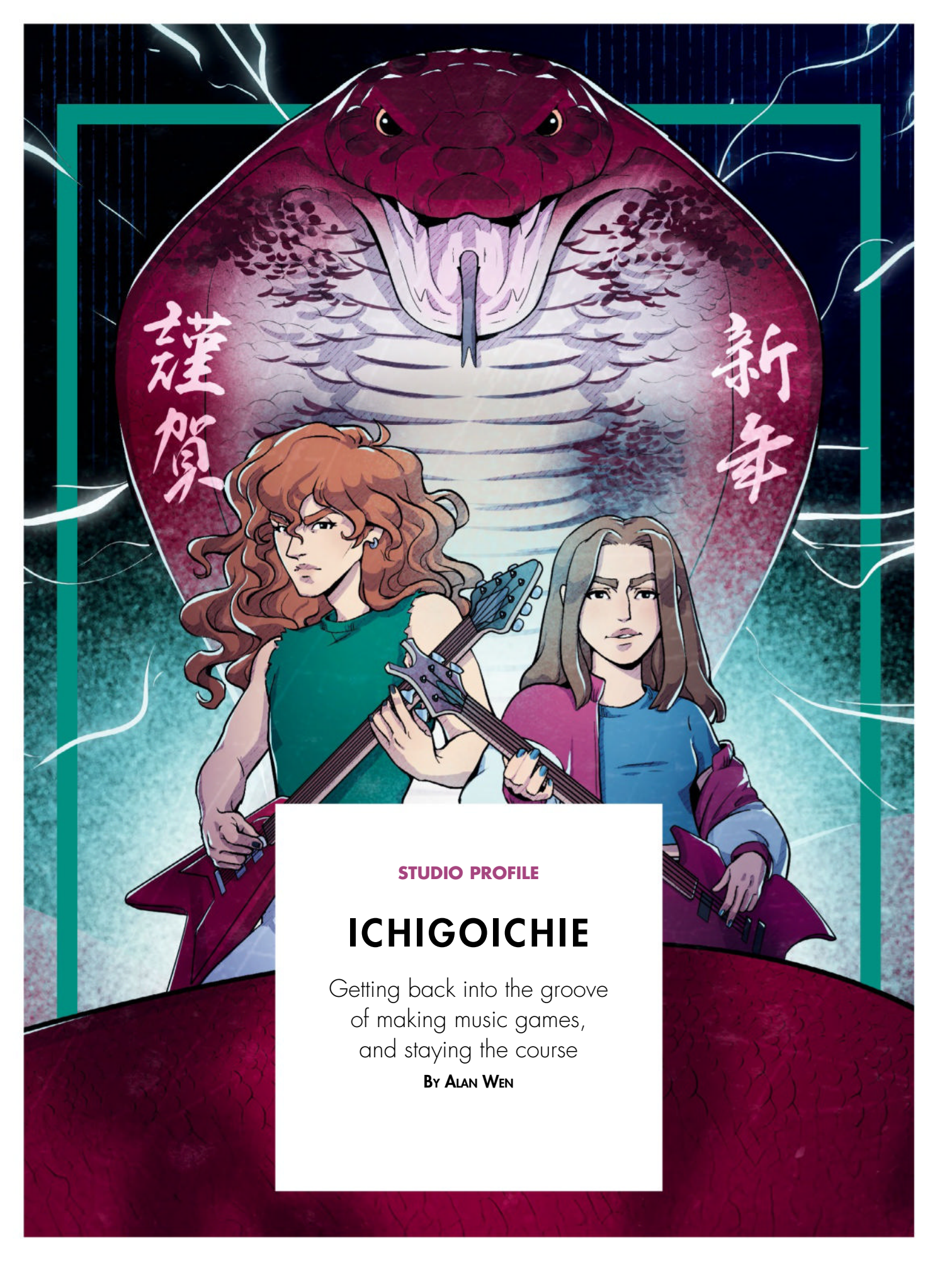
For his part, Yoshida says it presented both a challenge and an opportunity. "If we were going to take that direction, I really wanted to make sure we'd be able to show the massive grandness of it," he says. "And not just that but to show the beauty of it, and to be accurate in the way that we represent how the land looks. So in terms of the scale of the map itself, it may seem a little bit different and not what you'd expect. But I think in terms of being able to really feel the distance between various areas in the map, we found that this scale worked very well."

If the story comes to a natural ending, there's still plenty of Three Kingdoms history to cover. Are there any plans, then, for an *Origins 2*? We anticipate a noncommittal response, but Sho answers, more or less, in the affirmative. "Whether it will be called *Dynasty Warriors: Origins 2* is another matter," he says. "But yes, I do have some ideas in mind for it. These ideas are just in my head, and so I really want to work hard to bring about this reality, rather than leaving them as mere concepts. It's not a definitive thing, but this is what I personally would like to be able to pursue."

If that's one potential direction for this stalwart series, Sho has also expressed a desire to continue to explore *Warriors'* crossover potential. "Lord Of The Rings and Star Wars are two series that really spark my imagination. But I think Yoshida-san has his own thoughts." He does indeed, and our translator smilingly accepts that she can sit out this particular answer. "Mad Max!" Yoshida shouts enthusiastically. With *Origins* suggesting the Musou formula is as malleable as it is durable, that might not be as unlikely a collaboration as it sounds. ■



- 1 Concept art of the Eight Gates Golden Lock formation, which features in the novel and is a key battle in Liu Bei's campaign.
- 2 Yoshida says that the team treated each busy battlefield as a "set", focusing on the site's construction as much as its scale.
- 3 "I wanted to make sure that the character design would suit an action game," art director Shunya Yoshida says. "And since the game is based on Chinese history, we took a close look at Chinese martial arts, and how a lot of that is very graceful and beautiful at the same time. So we really wanted to incorporate those nimble actions as well."
- 4 Using certain tactics in specific scenarios can dramatically lower your opponents' courage.
- 5 An initial concept for *Origins'* amnesia-stricken protagonist.
- 6 This previously unreleased image shows the scale of the world map. As enjoyable as it is to mop up missions as you go along, the fast-travel function becomes more welcome as the game progresses



謹賀

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STUDIO PROFILE

ICHIGOICHIIE

Getting back into the groove
of making music games,
and staying the course

By ALAN WEN



Founded 2018

Employees 4

Key staff David Ventura (co-founder, creative director, CEO), Magnus Hallin (co-founder, technical director)

URL ichigoichie.games

Softography *Hexagroove: Tactical DJ, Backbeat*

Current project *Tactichord: Glam Strategy*

The Japanese expression that inspired Ichigoichie's name can be roughly translated as 'once in a lifetime'. It would be an apt description for how **David Ventura** got his foot in the door in the Japanese videogame industry. After a summer college internship in Kyoto where he used robotics to teach children music, he had his heart set on working in Japan full-time. "I had a really hard time because I didn't speak any Japanese and I didn't have any titles shipped, so companies like Sony kept telling me to go back to the States, ship some titles, learn the language and try again," he recalls. Through persistence and at his own expense, however, he eventually managed to land interviews by networking with two studios, FromSoftware (during its *Armored Core* days) and iNiS Corporation, the latter of which had achieved acclaim for *Gitaroo Man*. It was at iNiS where everything clicked. "They offered me a job on the spot, so I took it and cancelled my FromSoftware interview. I got lucky."

Having spent over a decade at iNiS, starting with the *Ouendan* and *Elite Beat Agents* games on DS and later more mainstream fare partnering with Microsoft on karaoke series *Lips*, Ventura's Japanese has vastly improved. And despite now being based in Stockholm, Sweden, his own studio's name (also going by 151A, homonymous to the Japanese pronunciation) suggests a desire to incorporate a little bit of Japanese philosophy. He's keen to clarify the idiom's actual meaning, though. "In the rough English translation we might think about it as an opportunity for yourself, whereas in Japanese it's more about the way you conduct yourself when you're talking with someone on the other side of the table. It's that every chance you have to talk to someone, it might be the last time in your life you meet this person, whether it's this interview we're having today or you're meeting a customer. So you want to leave a mark on each other's life forever and give it your best shot."

Which isn't to say Ventura has a rose-tinted view of Japanese culture. He recalls iNiS's rise (and eventual fall) as the company not only grew well beyond the handful of staff it had when he first joined but was grabbing any contracts it could find while people were working overtime and sleeping under their desks. "[iNiS] lost the soul of making games, because when I signed up, I wanted to make games about music that told stories that affected people in a positive way," he laments. It's how he wound up leaving both Japan and games for Europe to transfer his



Co-founder, CEO and creative director David Ventura, and co-founder and technical director Magnus Hallin

experience with music and software engineering to another field. It's also where the moniker 151A began, a domain he originally registered back in 2003 as a personal blog but decided to use when making independent music software. This included iOS app *Gambi*, which helped him get a job at Stockholm-based music software company Propellerhead, where he would meet 151A's co-founder, **Magnus Hallin**.

Hallin had something of a similar career trajectory, having founded the studio that made Lego-style sandbox game *Blockworld*, which

"WE HAD A COMPANY OF THREE PEOPLE, AND THEN WE GOT INTEGRATED INTO A COMPANY WITH 200 AND LOST FOCUS"

was then acquired by *Second Life* developer Linden Lab. "We had a company of three people, then we got integrated into a company with 200 people, got a management structure, and lost focus on doing the things we were passionate about," he says. "I too wanted to take a break from the games industry because making app-based games was stressful. I remember making this gacha app targeted at kids, and I thought, 'What am I doing?'" Yet while both wanted to work in music software for the "least corporate" companies they could find, a similar pattern would emerge as Propellerhead got larger, eventually renaming itself after its flagship digital audio workstation, Reason.

Fortunately, it was around this time that the Nintendo Switch launch relit a fire for both to get back into games. "We kind of had a bunch of extra creative juice pent up," Ventura says. Initial ideas leant into the hardware's unique features. "We started working on ideas using motion

controls and concepts for games that would take place without graphics at all, and just used vibration and sound." 151A's first game, *Hexagroove: Tactical DJ*, ultimately settled on something a bit more grounded. This was no beat-matching rhythm game, though. Instead, it involves mixing loops and samples like a real DJ while trying to keep your virtual crowd entertained. It had been born from an idea of gamifying the process of making music through samples, although the subtitle might suggest a mashup of music with strategy. That concept has become realised more explicitly since then: the forthcoming *Tactichord: Glam Strategy* marries grid tactics and musical choices.

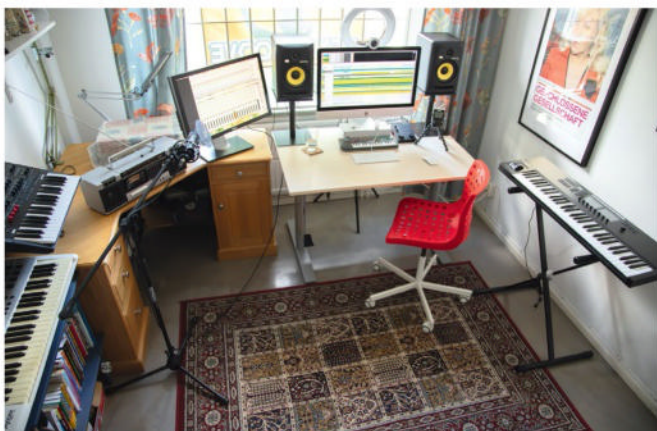
"*Hexagroove: Tactical DJ*'s subtitle was more a marketing thing that someone at Nintendo

suggested," Ventura admits. "We did want to convey that there was strategy involved, because you might think it's just a dance game without the subtitle. But the core is we're trying to incentivise some kind of musical concept, whether it's the creation of a good song or it's playing together well as a band or it's creating an over-the-top music video that's full of excess and cheese. We want to give the player agency in those things."

One challenge involved onboarding players. "We could never really figure out a good way of teaching *Hexagroove* while you're also playing *Hexagroove*," Hallin says. This is part of the reason why the studio works with a turn-based approach today. "Now you don't have to stop the music and be like, 'OK, now we have to instruct you', and then you move on but then we have to stop the music again to instruct you about something new. We can talk about things in a more slow-paced environment."

The flipside is that the turn-based approach means a lack of the immediate feedback that's

STUDIO PROFILE



The studio keeps itself lean in terms of head count but staffs up accordingly for projects, which includes collaborations with artists and musicians in both Stockholm and Tokyo

often intrinsic to a music game. "It's kind of like going from performing live on a stage to using an audio workstation, where I put the notes into the piano roll, I set up these things, but I don't really get to hear how everything is going to come together until the end," Ventura says. "But the point is that it's supposed to be a payoff."

Hallin agrees: "One inspiration for me was that I was playing in a traditional jazz big band when I was growing up, and when you sit at home and practise your part and you're, say, the second tenor saxophone, you don't get a super-interesting part, but you still have your part to play. But then at rehearsal with everyone, or in a live gig, suddenly you see how that tiny part slots into everything else."

There is an element of trust at work, then, in that the game has to deliver on its musical payoffs, but Ventura understands that the studio needs to present stronger feedback so that players feel a source of progression and anticipation. In the case of *Tactichord*, this manifests at the end of a battle that culminates in a music video which includes chords and lyrics you have chosen during the game.

The benefit of the studio's location is that *Tactichord* had its first playable demo funded by a grant from the EU's Creative Europe Media programme. "That's increased the budget and the scope of what we're able to accomplish far beyond what we did with our previous two titles," Ventura explains.

With just its third game project in seven years, 151A has also kept itself busy with contract work, whether that's co-developing music software or game consultation, which has also maintained the studio's ties to Japan. "A lot of our clients are actually Japanese companies," Ventura tells us. "We also have one guy that helps us with marketing who lives in the Tokyo area, and

he sometimes represents us at shows when I'm not there. We don't have any full-time employees there but we have a lot of jobs and part-time people that we work with, including musicians." Contracting has been a crucial part of the business from the beginning, and has also been important for giving the company runway in between projects. "I remember at iNiS it was always like, 'If this game doesn't sell, what are we going to do?' And that stress must really suck," Ventura says. "We don't have a huge operation here, but at least we're fortunate to run things responsibly enough that we don't have to lose massive amounts of sleep about the company folding if we don't hit a sales target."

"IT WAS ALWAYS LIKE, 'IF THIS GAME DOESN'T SELL, WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?' THAT STRESS MUST REALLY SUCK"

What has been important is that the studio remains independent, so it is committed to self-publishing its games instead of sinking time and money into chasing publishers. On the subject of crowdfunding, the memory of Ventura's former employer and NanaOn-Sha's ill-fated Kickstarter for *Project Rap Rabbit* still lingers (following bankruptcy proceedings and several name changes, iNiS now operates as Liona Interactive). "Crowdfunding is a great idea, but I think the thing that's quite clear in the economy now is that crowdfunding is something you get after you've already made it," Ventura says.

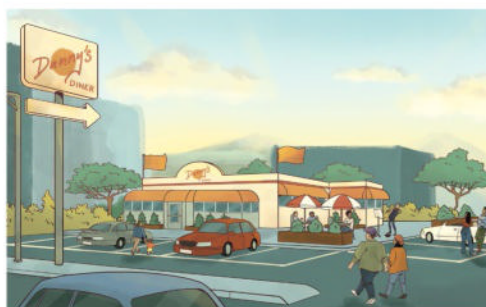
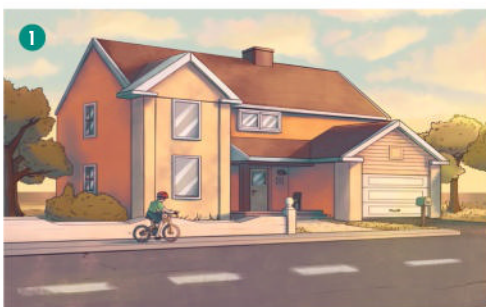
Nevertheless, Ichigoichie is finding ways to get more mileage out of its IP. It launched its own label, for instance, to publish the original music from its games, starting with *Backbeat*. "I guess it goes back to my engineering training, where if I

have this one thing, I think: 'Is there some way I can use it five ways to lower the costs of investing in it?'" Ventura says. "And I like to mess around with these transmedia things because it's relatively low-cost – we own the rights to the music, the comics and the characters. I'm not expecting Spotify to pay me any time soon, but Ichigoichie Records is just one more channel for people to learn about our products."

Now in its seventh year, 151A is aiming for modest and reasonable growth that will allow it to keep expanding its portfolio so that sales can eventually become self-sustaining revenue. Having departed from companies that became larger machines they no longer recognised,

today it seems that they wouldn't want to be anywhere else than here.

Ventura recalls a conversation he had with Takashi Tokita, co-director of *Chrono Trigger*, near the beginning of production on *Backbeat*. "I asked him: 'What should I do if we make this game and then it doesn't work out? Should we try to pivot and take the company nearer to something that's going to be a bit more of a sure bet? Or should I try to pull it in?'" He said, "No, you made a company, you went to go and make something different, so make your brand and your dream stand out. Double down on that. Don't give up on it". And I really believe in that. So we're just going to keep on trucking with making experiences that people can express themselves with. Experiences that are transformative in the way only music can be." ■



- 1 Ventura's roots seem to permeate the settings of 151A's games, as illustrated by the '90s American suburbia of *Backbeat*.
- 2 Ventura: "The games we make are so novel that just communicating them to a publisher takes such a long time. I can't walk up and say, 'It's like *PUBG* but with music'. The closest I've gotten [with *Tactichord*] is, 'It's *XCOM* with guitars', and people now say, 'Tell me more'."
- 3 Nintendo's Switch inspired Ventura and Hallin to get back into videogame development, resulting in 151A's debut project, 2019's *Hexagroove*

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

NEAR MISSES

Birdigo PC

Imagine an episode of Countdown where dictionary corner is populated by starlings, and you're not far off. *Birdigo* is a deck-building game about avian migration, the success of which, oddly, hinges on your ability to make words, Scrabble-like, from random letter tiles as the flock watches on. Each stop on your journey raises the stakes, asking you to hit bigger target scores, yet as in any deck-builder you also earn buffs as you progress. It's all quite simple and could do with better balancing, but putting finches and gulls in the place of Vorderman, Riley, Dent or whoever certainly gives the format wings.

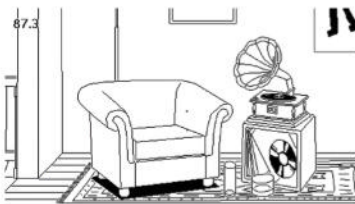


Time Flies PC, PS5, Switch

If you've ever said you'd love to be a fly on the wall, now's your chance – and you can attach yourself to dozens of other surfaces too. The aim is to complete a bucket list in the lifespan of your buzzing insect (measured in seconds by a ticking doom clock) while avoiding deadly hazards such as a hot lightbulb or a half-finished glass of wine. Like a minimalist *Untitled Goose Game*, the tasks themselves are mere amusing interactions once you find them, but *Time Flies* glides along on its humour – even more so once you polish off the first list, leaving the house to mingle in society.



Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content



REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

100 Donkey Kong Bananza

Switch 2

104 Wuchang: Fallen Feathers

PC, PS5, Xbox Series

108 Killing Floor 3

PC, PS5, Xbox Series

110 Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream

PC, PS5, Xbox Series

112 Wheel World

PC, PS5, Xbox Series

114 Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound

PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

116 Shadow Labyrinth

PC, PS5, Switch, Switch 2, Xbox Series

118 The Wandering Village

PC, PS5, Switch

120 Tales Of The Shire: A Lord Of The Rings Game

PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

122 RoboCop: Rogue City – Unfinished Business

PC, PS5, Xbox Series

123 The Drifter

PC

Nintendo goes bananas

While sales broke records, the Switch 2 launch lacked a certain excitement that we'd usually associate with new Nintendo hardware. The timing was part of that – the console arrived just as we all turned our collective attention to LA for the annual festivities – and the relatively low-key lead up to release. (That media outlets didn't receive units in advance didn't help.) Yet it was also partly because of the machine itself, largely presented as an upgrade to what we already had, with a launch title in *Mario Kart World* that hit the spot but mostly felt like a natural expansion for the series. For a month or so, then, we've been in a state of ambivalence: pleased to have the new machine while slightly concerned about the conservatism of its software.

It has only been a month or so, however, and clearly Nintendo can only keep the lid on its more exuberant design tendencies for so long. And if eyebrows have been raised at the lack of a new *Mario* platformer on the horizon, that now feels like a symptom of our own conservatism, hoping for the familiar over the fresh.

Instead, Nintendo has delivered another kind of platform game, built around Mario's original nemesis, Donkey Kong, which not only defies expectation but deconstructs the genre in a way that might feel too experimental in a Mario vehicle. Not to mention that *Donkey Kong Bananza* shows off the power of Switch 2 with its voxel-based scenery not merely by offering it up as visual spectacle, but by asking you to run riot and *play* with its possibilities.

True, there are aspects of *Bananza* that are a little too destructive, creating rough edges that *Mario* games tend to avoid. But if *Bananza* lacks that elegant perfection, there's no doubt that this is the Nintendo we want to see more of in the coming years – smashing genre norms, going wild with ideas, giving us things we didn't know we wanted.



Donkey Kong Bananza

Everybody knows the smart move when they begin a platform game: turn away from the adventure to check for secrets in the opposite direction. Not so in *Donkey Kong Bananza*. Placed on its first screen, you'll instead stop to smash it all to pieces. Straight jabs with the Y button knock dents, then holes, into walls and lumps of gold cascade out, which DK (as folks here call our simian hero) collects. It's a beautifully feral and gratifying action, placed exactly where you'd expect it on the controller. Yet the same can't be said of jumping, the platforming fundamental that normally occupies the B button by default. Tapping B here takes you down instead of up, DK pounding at the floor until it gives way. In a stroke, Nintendo thus reconfigures the genre it all but invented, removing the ground beneath our feet.

There is an option to shift jump (placed by default on the A button) back to its familiar home, and it's one we soon take — decades of muscle memory find the change a touch *too* extreme. But we can appreciate the intention behind it. *Bananza* announces itself as not merely an alternative to *Mario* while we await the plumber's return, but a genre rejig of a scale *Mario* himself hasn't seen since 1996. The platform game is turned inside out and upside down here, supported by voxel-based terrain deforming tech that *needs* Switch 2's power (even then, there are framerate dips). If *Astro Bot* served the wow factor the genre has been missing, *Bananza* returns it with venom. Your move, Asobi.

The simulation of destruction in *Bananza* is a special trick indeed, and Nintendo is keen to show it off. After our initial outburst, we're let loose in a vast cave where monkeys mine for gem-like bananas, and running towards the next marked objective is the last thing on our mind — the invitation to break things is irresistible. As rock clusters buckle and explode and seams of gold shatter like caramel, we keep hammering that punch button, almost mindlessly, carving labyrinths into the scenery before resurfacing in uncharted territory. There's constant positive reinforcement as bursts of shiny ore gather in our wake — like a rowdy King Midas, everything we punch turns to gold.

Our first 30 minutes with *Bananza* is pure vandalism. DK is a furry Hulk, a character defined by his actions, committing a brute attack on the structures of a genre as well as the game. And there's another twist that rattles the foundations: DK can mount walls as well as smash them, casually ambling up vertical surfaces. Where *Mario* would have to hop and somersault to reach distant heights, here they may be in easy reach. True, limitations are in place with metal constructs that refuse to bend and smooth walls that even DK can't grip, without which the whole façade would crumble. But it's still impressive just how often you can create your own routes to a target by tunnelling and clambering, or thumb your nose at ancient platforming

Developer/publisher Nintendo
(Nintendo EPD)
Format Switch 2
Release Out now

If *Astro Bot* served the wow factor the genre has been missing, *Bananza* returns it with venom



tropes such as hopping over lasers by digging underneath them instead — decades of fine design undone with a cheeky primate shrug.

The prime objective throughout the game, however, isn't to climb but to fall. Starting near the surface of *Bananza*'s world, you make your way to its core, stopping off at various 'sublayers' where you need to solve problems to unblock further descent. Each sublayer is a little world in itself, a large, themed open level containing communities of talking animals and rock beings in need of your assistance. Some are also home to 'elders,' giant animals that will bestow the game's Bananza powers upon you — essential to navigate the sections that follow.

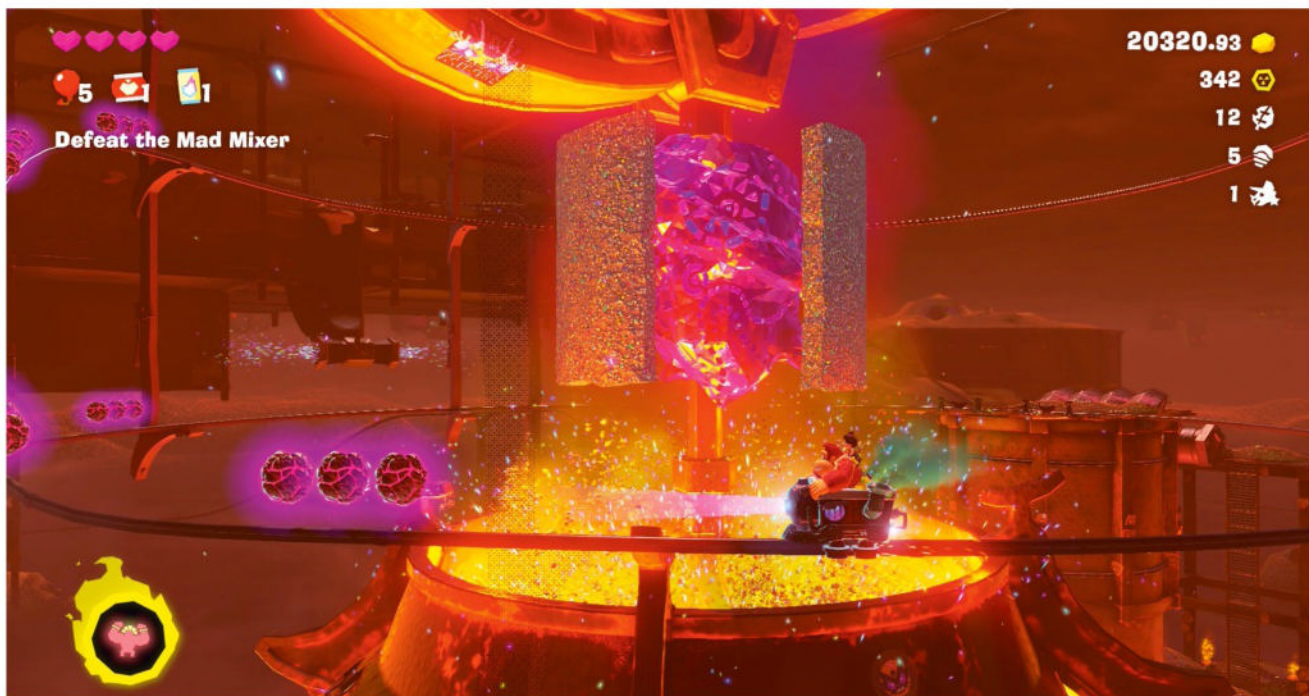
As a personality in these encounters, DK is little more than a loveable muppet, consumed by his desire to find more jewelled bananas (the main collectible). More than *Mario*, it feels like he needs a travelling companion, which he gets in the shape of Pauline. Perched on DK's shoulder for much of the journey, she really does feel like a passenger at times — where Cappy gave rise to *Mario*'s transformations in *Odyssey*, here we have the contrivance of Pauline's singing voice that inspires DK into Bananza mode, a function that frankly could have been filled by some magical object. Yet she gives voice to your quest beyond DK's grunts, adding glee and wonder. We particularly enjoy her meandering thoughts before you take a nap at one of the game's rest spots.

As for the Bananzas, these inject DK with an animal power, charged up by collecting gold then activated by beating your chest. The first, bestowed by the elder gorilla, bulks you up to deliver extra-ferocious punches, while the likes of the zebra or elephant Bananza turn you into a strange hybrid beast — an uncanny piece of character design we still haven't grown used to. The abilities you gain are a mixed bag in terms of usefulness and amusement, though. We largely forget about the zebra's fast sprint and turbo boost, for instance, outside of situations specifically designed around them, while the elephant's terrain-suction power becomes a go-to, making short work of plenty of obstacles.

More interesting is how the game combines these skills (along with persistent moves such as throwing rocks or using them as makeshift surfboards) with the properties of the materials in the environment. More than *Mario*, there's a touch of *Breath Of The Wild* here in the interplay between substances. Take the Crockoid, for example, a spindly gold skeleton enemy clad in a block of armour. The nature of that armour can vary wildly, changing how you go about revealing the body underneath. Soil can be punched off in chunks, while thorns require a weapon. Concrete can be broken with explosive rock, and lava cooled with a piece of ice. Now consider that the same substances and rules make up



ABOVE Nintendo firmly acknowledges Rare's history with DK in *Bananza*. 2D stages, barrels and minecarts feature, along with cameos from Kong family members who first made an appearance in *Donkey Kong Country*



TOP The elders represent some of the game's stronger character designs, while its villains prove to be less memorable, with future appearances in *Mario Kart World* far from guaranteed.
MAIN Your main adversary, Void Kong, corrupts machines and spreads patches of unbreakable metal around the world.
RIGHT While DK is a raging beast against enemies, try to punch an innocent NPC and the action transforms into a high-five





the world, all working to a physics model that calculates the types, angles and strengths of impact and adjusts whole landscapes accordingly. Here is that much-lauded videogame concept, the sandbox, where sand itself (and dirt, and stone, and...) is the key ingredient.

So remarkable is this that it seems churlish to find fault. But with all that freedom, *Bananza* can feel a bit directionless outside its main goals. Exploring levels, you stumble across entryways to bonus stages and challenge courses, as well as self-contained skill tests in the open, all of which reward you with bananas on completion. These account for only a fraction of the bananas available, though, with many buried around each sublayer along with fossils and as much gold as you want to accumulate. Less structured areas, then, tend to encourage collecting over creativity. A clap of DK's hands not only draws in uncovered trinkets but releases a sonar wave that highlights others submerged in the vicinity. It's easy to get hooked in a cycle of burrowing towards one blip on your radar, grabbing the object, then spotting another, mashing away at the scenery towards each prize. Doing so, you might skip tracts of neatly crafted level design, snaffling the reward for overcoming obstacles you never encountered.

Also, as much as *Bananza*'s open-plan nature welcomes unorthodox solutions, few obstacles demand much thought. For all the variation in enemies, a well-aimed chunk of rock will do for a surprisingly high number, while many bosses melt under the force of a Bananza. Then again, there's reason for the game to be lenient, as late-game and post-credits challenges prove. DK's blunt force lacks Mario's elegance; his control scheme is overstuffed and idiosyncratic next to that of his acrobatic rival. Precise climbing, throwing or digging



APE À LA MODE

Collectibles all feed into a currency system in *Bananza*, with bananas growing a skill tree of upgrades and non-essential abilities, and gold paying for consumables and perks such as rest spots and shortcuts across levels. Most sublayers also contain dozens of fossils, which can be used to kit out DK and Pauline with fine fashions that offer passive boons or protection against local hazards. For Pauline, you purchase new outfits in full, while DK can mix and match combinations of ties, britches and fur dye. Multi-shaded coats are an option, as are lurid patterned shorts, and you may end up sporting a ruffled cravat. Smartly, fossils are only legal tender on the layer they're found in, so there's no incentive to save them for later – just grab whatever you can.

Items include apple juice that refills your health automatically when you run out and balloons that hoist you back to land when you'd otherwise fall to your doom – handy when you tunnel right out of a cliff face

under pressure doesn't suit the great ape's disposition. There's also the problem of a camera forced to track you through tight, improvised tunnels, which feels half-solved. Should it follow closely behind, or position itself at a distance, either within the rock (which then turns transparent) or in a space outside? Often it tries all the options, and doesn't always settle on the best one.

Regardless, wherever you are in *Bananza* – and some sublayers are wonderfully inventive – there's a compulsive quality that never goes away. Every time we resume a session we begin hammering that punch button as if by instinct. Before we've even got our bearings, we're usually halfway into a mountainside, wondering what we'll find, or not wondering anything at all, just enjoying the crumble and crunch. With it comes a sense that allowing such breakage is as bold as Nintendo could be. Here is a flagship platform game that refuses to ape *Mario* – a generational leap and a reimagining of a genre.

Perhaps, though, like moving the jump button, the departure is too great. Indeed, despite all the time we spend piling into rock faces, if we were to recount our favourite moments from *Bananza*, we'd probably list some of its more conventional sequences, the ones that – dare we say it? – could also be made to fit into a *Mario* game. That doesn't mean anything here is a waste, though. Far from it. Nintendo has still made something uniquely enjoyable, while wantonly shredding the playbook in the process. Whatever plans might be in place for Mario's next adventure, Donkey Kong has changed the lay of the land.

Post Script

Bananza has layers, but what about levels?

There's a certain joy in one of the later sublayers of *Bananza* that hits differently from all the rest. Looking out over a part of the world we're about to traverse, we see not an open playground but an abstract construct of pathways, arranged horizontally and vertically into a kind of assault course. There are carefully placed enemies down there amid tests of platforming skills and even a puzzle element as we're required throw rocks at moving switches to bring bridges in and out of existence. This is an extended, self-contained sequence built around a single idea — in old money, what we might have called a 'level'.

In its 3D platformers, Nintendo has largely rejected the notion of the level since *Mario 64*, when it served up 'courses' instead. In that case, though, open areas continued to house a series of distinct objectives, each coming at the end of something that resembled a level after all. Leap forward to *Odyssey* and *Bananza* and the 3D platformer has been fully transformed. These are games that, for the most part, deplore prolonged focus on single goals. Courses have become canapés, drawn together into a vast tasting menu.

In *Bananza*, many of the more traditional platforming tasks are siloed off into challenge stages, with three or so in each sublayer, secreted behind triangular gates. There are three bananas to be had in each — one at the halfway point, one at the finish, and another cleverly tucked away in a hard-to-reach spot — and many are great fun. Like a level, the challenge stages arrow in on a particular facet of your skillset, the properties of certain materials, or both. Some hark back to the classic design of *Donkey Kong Country*. Yet they remain comparatively bite-sized, and rarely push their core idea to its logical conclusion before you're peeling the final banana.

Still, they're a feast compared to the bonus stages you'll also discover. Here, there may be a single banana on offer and a time limit of 30 seconds in which to destroy a number of cunningly arranged enemies or a piece of architecture. Or you're asked to gather as much gold as you can against the clock, smashing through walls of the stuff or bouncing off scenery made of rubber. Again, these are enjoyable, and function as parallels to the simple bonus screens of old. At their smartest, they also plant seeds in the mind, revealing tricks you might then use in general play. But equally they add to an overall sense of fragmentation.

There are a lot of bright ideas in *Bananza* — and that's never a bad thing — but while each is given plenty of time in the spotlight in total, individual instances tend to lack substance. Rather than the continuous escalation you'd find in a traditional level, each new

visit to an idea seems to reset its progress — a case of reiteration over iteration. In terms of presenting you with a satisfying challenge, this is an issue. You don't feel like you're gradually mastering each technique so much as testing it repeatedly in different contexts. A few exceptions aside, you'll have to wait until after the credits to encounter real demands for concerted effort. Then you can return to the elders to partake in their 'rehearsal' courses, which finally feel like a decent workout for each *Bananza* form. It says something that only here do we fully grasp some of the finer points of DK's magical abilities, which we hadn't been asked to exercise before.

The value of levels isn't merely a matter of challenge, though. *Astro Bot* is far from difficult for the most part, yet its discrete stages, each crafted around a core idea, satisfy because they have a clear beginning, middle and end. By the time you arrive at a level goal, you've been given something fun to play with and properly explored its potential through a range of use cases, each building on top of the last. Fully sated, you're ready for the next toy.

Which isn't to say that *Astro Bot*'s interpretation of platform gaming is better, only that different approaches to the genre highlight what's missing in others. And Nintendo has recognised this more clearly than any other studio in the 3D era, continuing to provide a supply of point-to-point platform games between Mario's wider adventures. Still, by 2023's *Super Mario Wonder*, fragmentation had crept into that format too. The marvellous twists in each stage on collecting a wonder flower were often brief interludes, feeling rather like teasers for full levels that didn't actually exist. They were a fantastic way to show off the breadth of imagination in the game, no doubt, but is it always wise to leave us wanting more?

Returning to *Bananza*, what shouldn't be ignored is that the design of its sublayers is often quietly sublime. These aren't merely flat expanses but groupings of layers within layers, with tunnels taking you down to deeper, more intense versions of your initial landing point, and sometimes bringing you back up again in a different place altogether. Look at the (extremely useful) 3D map and you'll note how they're also built of distinct yet connected sections, each a little different in its contents and demands. It can be difficult to appreciate the craft that's gone into creating these large areas, in fact, because of the way you're allowed to tunnel around, blithely unaware of what's passing above. Nor should the joy of accidental discoveries in open-plan play be disregarded. But — on the level — we have the appetite for larger servings, and the attention span too. ■

It can be difficult to appreciate the craft because of the way you're allowed to tunnel around, blithely unaware



Wuchang: Fallen Feathers

There's a phrase you'll get used to seeing in *Wuchang: Fallen Feathers*, aside from the obligatory notification of failure whenever the titular hero meets her demise. It occurs after a successive number of reawakenings, displayed below a flashing red seal: 'Madness Descends'. Afflicted with a feathering disease that's spreading from her left arm, Wuchang knows that the condition slowly drives its victims to insanity. While she never succumbs to the worst fate of transforming into something monstrous, her madness eventually manifests as a hostile figure in a hat who invades the last place you fell. The message is thus a portent of their arrival, although it could equally sum up our state of mind as we try to overcome the game's challenges.

Leenzeer unmistakably cuts from the same grubby cloth that FromSoftware uses for its action RPGs, and you'll note some direct nods to *Bloodborne*. The red currency acquired from defeated enemies is the biggest giveaway, but there are little things too: the voices of residents speaking from behind boarded-up houses; a woman's beastly transformation as blood spatters on the wall; a forest trap designed to catch you out with a second swing. More often, however, *Wuchang* escapes such immediate comparisons as the Chengdu-based studio interprets these influences through a local cultural lens. While the 16th century, at the end of the Ming dynasty, is certainly a turbulent time in China, it has a somewhat more zen and inviting atmosphere than Yarnham with its pitchfork mobs, at least on initial appearances. You encounter a handful of friendly, or at least non-hostile, faces at Reverent Temple, while the paths in *Worship's Rise* are lined with Buddha statues, temples and pretty bamboo.

This isn't mere set dressing; the game seems to embody the Taoist philosophy of yin and yang. Sure, you face monstrous creatures and ruthless bandits, but our instinct to kill or be killed isn't required because any of the warring factions here are simply evil (though we wonder if the rebels being held in a relatively unsympathetic light is symptomatic of a country with zero tolerance for dissent). Even Wuchang's feathering condition is far from a purely negative force. By perfect-dodging attacks or landing certain hits, she gains Skyborn Might, a points system comparable to *Black Myth: Wukong*'s, which allows her to cast spells or enhance her melee attacks across five weapon types.

There is method to the madness gauge too. As it gets higher, so does your attack power, along with the damage you receive. It's a state that has fewer tradeoffs than the rather more blunt equivalent in *Demon's Souls*, for example, where you simply have to adapt to having half a health bar most of the time. You can also unlock perks to lighten the burden of eventually confronting your inner demon, and even sanity can become a source of currency, in exchange for acquiring helpful items.

Developer Leenzeer Games
Publisher 505 Games
Format PC, PS5 (tested), Xbox Series
Release Out now

Leenzeer
 unmistakably
 cuts from the
 same cloth that
 FromSoftware
 uses for its
 action RPGs



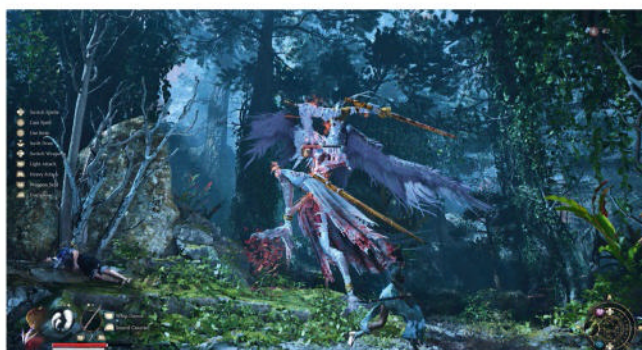
UNEASY ALLIES
 While *Wuchang* is a singleplayer game, a bone whistle acquired early on enables you to summon an NPC to help you during a boss battle. Such aid isn't guaranteed for every fight, however. The appearance of a temporary comrade is conditional on them having a personal stake in vanquishing the same foe, so it's in your interest to speak to NPCs in the world when you encounter them and stay attentive to their arcs to ensure that your fates intertwine. In general play, meanwhile, your inner demon can become an improvised ally since it's hostile to everyone. It's possible to coax them into attacking nearby enemies, and as they get distracted and wreck each other, it sets up the opportunity for you to jump in to finish them off.

Yet for all the flexibility that's offered, we often find ourselves reverting to bread-and-butter tactics against the game's brick-wall encounters. Whether facing a humanoid opponent or a towering beast, there's usually an exhilarating dance of dodges and counters to learn, yet the rhythm hardly matches the choreography of a martial-arts film, as we can't reliably discern whether we've just performed a perfect dodge or taken a hit. As we glance at the screen's bottom corner and our all-too small health bar, it often feels like the reveal of a mortal wound delayed for dramatic effect. And when we do succeed, the followup window is so small that we're left chasing our enemy, cursing their knack of outmanoeuvring our blade.

Parrying is an option with some weapons, but gaining Skyborn Might through perfect dodges is more rewarding. And if the ability to cancel an incoming attack by clashing weapons sounds fun on paper, it only seems to activate on the third or fourth hit of a combo, by which time you're likely to have been hit, if not had your assault interrupted. We also shrink from more ostentatious skills that yield no significant boost in results against HP-laden bosses, even when they're staggered and open to a critical strike. And while, with the right timing, some spells can be cast to cancel incoming damage, we tend to fall back on those that reduce what we do take for a limited time — a conservative but notably more reliable tactic.

Bufs gained from pendants or by tempering your arm with acupuncture needles are a little more worthy of experimentation, especially against rank-and-file foes, and more so once we acquire the ability to regain a bit of health for every enemy slain. Then again, it's not the strength of these enemies that makes life difficult in the first place, more their placement and behaviour. Many hide in doorways to ambush you, while others charge forward and lock you into a humiliating grab animation. The worst dole out status effects that remind us of the harshest equivalents in *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne*. If it's not bad enough stepping into noxious fog that spreads corruption, sapping your health, how about being assailed by an enemy that afflicts you with blight, lowering your ability to recover health for a time, or the priests who condemn you to instant death merely by maintaining eye contact? Traps can feel mean, too, the nadir arriving when we reach a mountain city strewn with explosive mines beneath the snow.

True, there is little here that should deter the *Souls* veteran in search of a new challenge to add to the ever-growing pile. And while we may never be quite as interested in uncovering the backstory of our mute amnesiac as in retailoring her skillset or wardrobe, *Wuchang* does a commendable job of draping the Soulslike in eastern garments — provided the red mist doesn't have you tearing them asunder.



ABOVE Scenes such as this deliver more than a hint of déjà vu, giving straight-up flashbacks to *Bloodborne*. Does a similar battle await here? Players of FromSoftware's game will proceed with caution, just in case

MAIN Many spells require multiple Skyborn points. The UI in the bottom-left corner is a case of form over function, but if the spell icon isn't greyed out, you can use it.

ABOVE Avian figures appear frequently and include harmless birds that, when cut down, leave consumable feathers that can temporarily boost one of your stats, but also some feathered fiends that are among *Wuchang's* most formidable enemies.

RIGHT The longsword has a discipline skill enabling you to deflect attacks, but you can also choose to learn other disciplines





Teasing an enemy in plain sight behind a basic obstacle such as a locked door can feel like a cruel kind of trolling

Post Script

And back again

When we think of Soulslikes, it's usually the brutally unforgiving combat that first comes to mind, followed by bonfire checkpoints causing enemies to respawn, or currencies that can be dropped and lost forever. But they are also arguably defined by their labyrinthine level design, paths winding around, snakelike, until you unlock a bolted door from the other side or kick down a ladder to loop back to familiar territory. This particular element was far less prominent in the other notable Soulslike to emerge from China, *Black Myth: Wukong*. For all the From comparisons, it was ultimately more akin to a boss rush, with each chapter whisking you off to another location.

For now that remains a one-off, as *Wuchang* follows the classic blueprint more closely, presenting one seamlessly interconnected world. The first area, Worship's Rise, leads to unexpected places, from a temple hiding an underground entrance to a mine, which in turn leads you to a hellish burnt-out beach, inaccessible from an earlier path owing to a fire. And sure enough, hours later, we happen upon a door that needs unbolting. We pull it open and step back into the courtyard of the Reverent Temple, where our journey began. That you'll probably fast-travel between shrines in between doesn't take away the

satisfaction of slowly building a mental map of Shu. There's a layered intricacy that makes piecing the paths together more satisfying than taking, say, the formulaic shortcuts of Team Ninja's mission-based *Nioh*.

Yet this is almost a quaint piece of level design now, since From itself has widened its approach to both character movement and environment design in *Sekiro* and *Elden Ring*. One reason, perhaps, is that mazy constructs often rely on arbitrary, and nonsensical, barriers. At least *Wuchang* doesn't deploy invisible walls, which were frequent in *Black Myth*, but there's something comical about being defeated by impassable furniture when we've just cut through the shelves and jars in the previous room. The opposite of shortcuts, these constitute contrived and lengthy detours for the sake of maximising the game's real estate. It's all the more vexing when the roadblock feels like the natural path forward, and we must run in circles until we spot a stairway or ladder in the shadows.

Without the ability to jump or vault, we have to accept these environmental limitations, even at their most absurd — such as when we meet our demise after falling into a shallow stream. We also occasionally have to question when a shortcut really is a shortcut,

especially when the mandatory fog-door run rears its head, where a trek from the nearest shrine is par for the course. Five years into a console generation that boasts barely noticeable loading times, it's galling to see time wasted on running the same needless gauntlet, or calling a lift with a laboured animation, which we send back just before stepping off in the likelihood that this won't be the last time we'll need to use it.

Would *Wuchang* be less of a Soulslike without these trappings? Perhaps a genre should be defined not by its traditions but what makes it compelling. On that count, the existence of invisible paths is a neat surprise when we notice their presence, even if we've seen a similar trick before. There's also something fascinating, if perplexing, about the ominous stone doors that present us with a question before warping us to another part of the map, seemingly in a different state. Equally, it's intriguing how *Wuchang* opts to take another leaf from *Bloodborne*'s book by marking its story with the passing of time when certain milestones have passed, which casts the world in a new light while revealing new paths. In the same way, perhaps the best thing for any Soulslike is to find ways to keep updating its proposition to players, rather than running in circles towards stasis. ■

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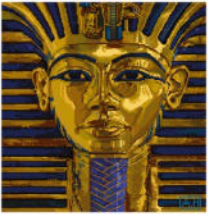
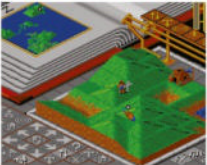




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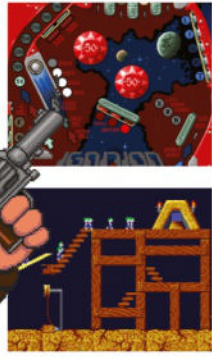


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Killing Floor 3

The best teammates in *Killing Floor 3* know how to get the most from doors. Three games in, this series remains a bit of a gleeful throwback, a wave-based horde affair in which monsters appear sporadically while you move around the warren-like levels. Closing a door as a muddle of enemies approaches allows them to pool in one place. It also means that you can then open the door and be greeted by a tidy arrangement of targets, neatly lined up like Christmas carollers. Any singing, though, will be drowned out by the explosion from a well-placed grenade.

The door trick is a memorable element in a game that often seems to need one. *Killing Floor 3*'s road to release was paved with an underwhelming closed beta and a delay while player concerns were addressed. Those concerns included everything from uninspired monster design and the tethering of characters to classes to a disproportionate weighting towards futuristic weapons in the arsenal and glitches and hitches during play, presumably caused by the shift to Unreal Engine 5.

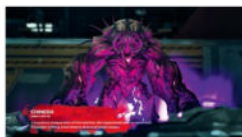
The design team, meanwhile, wanted to make a gloomier, grittier game this time. They wanted a more grounded experience, which called for a slower pace, albeit shot through with precision bursts of speed and agility in the form of dashes, mantling and knee slides. They've succeeded with this, to a degree, but the grimdark result now finds itself surrounded by zanier and more charismatic competitors in the forms of *Helldivers* and even *FBC: Firebreak*. With its gloomy military installations and underground labs, its chicken-skinned zombies and bloated poison-flingers, this venerable horror blaster suddenly finds itself slightly short on character.

That's not to say it's no fun. Drop into a map with a full squad and, by the final boss wave, the once-glossy walls will be painted with gore. Teamwork is still a necessity whenever a wave closes in and the monster counter on the screen starts to work its way down from the mid-200s. The new maps are complex spaces that you need to learn, a melange of open arenas, corridors and daringly deployed dead ends. They're also much more vertical, since both players and enemies can climb more freely. Zipwires work as a form of hypertext, connecting distant spots all but instantaneously, and auto-turrets and ammo dispensers can be brought to life if you've brought the right kit with you.

The player classes offer relatively novel ways to experience each map and find synergies, even if the rather bland levelling system means each takes a while to become genuinely entertaining. Alongside the all-rounders, medics and engineers are playful oddities such as a class that specialises in flame weapons and can trigger an expanding bubble of fire as its special move. There's also a ninja class which goes into combat

Developer/publisher
Tripwire Interactive
Format PC (tested), PS5, Xbox Series
Release Out now

Mid-level monsters, their legs blasted away, will swipe comically at you from the floor and provide easy targets



BOSS RUSH

Of the three bosses in the current game, the Chimera is easily the best. Not only does its squat, hulking body make it slightly comical – it looks at times like one of the goofy mascots from Monster Munch snacks – but it heads into battle spawning scarecrow-like enemies with wailing Jack O'Lantern faces. Finally someone on the design team seems to have been having fun. Because they stick around much longer than normal foes, the bosses are a chance to enjoy the tweaks to enemy AI the developers have employed. Chimera can warp around the map, an ability they often use intelligently to separate stragglers. To get cornered by one of these things is genuinely frightening, which makes hearing the approach of your teammates all the sweeter.

with a katana and has throwing stars as its backup weapon. Best of all, ninjas can use a grappling hook to zip themselves towards foes for a quick finisher.

The rhythm that emerges in each match is still satisfying, too, with each wave of monsters followed by a dash to the shop to stock up on ammo, armour and maybe a new gun. Again, it gets you racing through these complicated areas as the time ticks down, and it encourages team bonding as you regroup. This is where the game excels, in fact. This is that rare multiplayer title where you can fully expect the random players you've been matched with to sling you a bit of spare 'dosh', the in-game currency, so you'll all be better prepared for what comes next.

Even here, though, there are problems. That in-game shop offers different weapons, but there's little of that delicious MOBA-like experience of becoming far more powerful as a match progresses towards its climax. The monsters locked in with you seem unlikely to quake in their boots at your destructive capabilities. This is probably because the bulk of player evolution takes place outside of the matches, where there are those skill points to be plugged in as you level up, along with a complex system of weapon mods that allows you to alter everything from a gun's ammo or a blade's glinting surface to a rifle's stock or sights. It's entertaining stuff in principle (even if the menus can be fiddly), yet it makes your status within a game feel a little static.

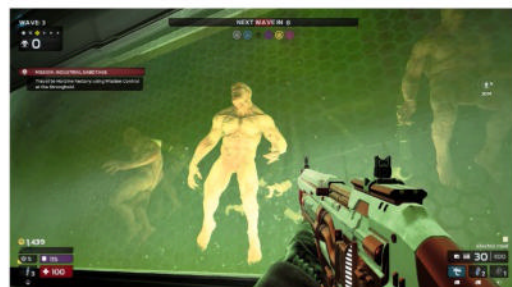
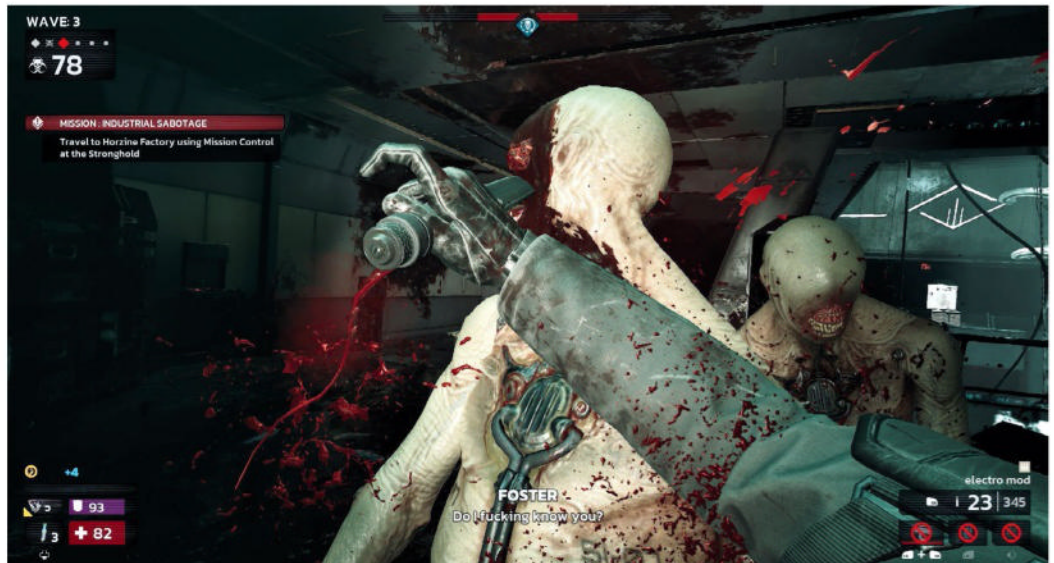
Many of the newest tweaks, meanwhile, don't add up to very much. A narrative system that has you selecting specific levels to complete simple story objectives doesn't conjure that kind of playing-against-the-design chaos that a similar system does in *Fortnite*, largely because the scope of the game and the scale of the maps are so much smaller here. It's too easy to abandon it completely and simply live with the narrative pop-up lurking forever on the UI. A new hub, meanwhile, adds a burst of toybox XCOM flair with its VTOL that whisks you off to each match, but there's little reason to actually spend time in this space, and it can feel a bit like a menu that's simply had walking added to it.

Throw in a few low-level technical glitches – occasional stuttering, the rare enemy frozen in a T-pose in a doorway – and it's hard not to feel underwhelmed. A decent match will still offer a thrill, and sometimes a brisk laugh – mid-level monsters, their legs blasted away, will swipe comically at you from the floor and provide easy targets. But with eight maps and three final bosses in the current release, you'll probably feel that you've seen most of what's on offer within four or five hours. To put a more positive spin on things, multiplayer game design is a wave-based proposition in and of itself nowadays. There are decent bones here. Hopefully the designers are rushing to their own upgrade shop, and will return with something special.

RIGHT Melee is not just a way to clear space for yourself, it's the chance for the designers to really lean into the horror motif with some delirious splatter.

MAIN Bosses dominate the space of each level, not by physically filling it but by being able to navigate it so relentlessly.

BOTTOM Weapon mods allow for tricks such as electrically charged ammunition. It's fun to toy with, but if you've played much *Borderlands*, there's nothing here that will surprise you



ABOVE Levels feel rather light on detailing – and so correspondingly a little deficient in character – but an alien zoo/laboratory complete with grotesque targets always seems to work in a futuristic horror game

Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream

One of the great delights of this stealth adventure tends to come at the very start of a level. This is the moment when the isometric camera shifts from the position of your tiny, crouching avatars and soars out over the complex muddle of cityscape, parkland and shattered coast that lies before you. There will be paths to cross and patrols to avoid. Maybe you'll spot the odd overhead lightbulb that you can shatter with a well-placed shot from your sling. *Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream* is a compact game, powered by simple, well-tested ideas and made by a team of fewer than 20 developers. Yet these moments reveal that there's a luxuriousness to it as well.

Above all else, it offers the pleasures of landscape. It tells the simple tale of a young girl searching for her missing brother, who's wanted by authoritarian police, but the city this search takes her across is the game's true star. There are sun-bleached brickwork façades and golden railings, factories and stations and palaces. There are complicated interlocking structures where gantries cross high over cobbled streets. The place is based on Scandinavian cities of the early 1900s, walls painted with huge, faded advertising images for imported tea and other luxuries. Exploring it is a treat, and it's telling that the game struggles only in the rare instances when it steps away from the streets and heads down into formless subterranean depths.

Stealth is simple but robust throughout: avoid the light and stick to the shadows. The game's at its best when levels pit you and your team against patrols of the most basic guards as you work your way towards the next objective. The twist to the standard genre template is a lean towards the squad management of a *Commandos* or *Shadow Tactics* – the traditional sneaking arsenal is divided between three characters, who you can switch between at will. The youngest, Hanna, can fire knockout darts from a blowpipe and wriggle through small vents. Alva, older and more experienced, can shatter street lamps to create areas of darkness and climb poles to get a better lay of the land. Finally, gruff Sebastian can choke enemies and swim.

Crucially, every offensive move a character possesses incorporates a weakness. Hanna's darts take a few seconds to bring down a foe, during which time they can spot you or, in turn, be spotted by nervous comrades. Alva's slingshot creates a noise that will attract guards. Sebastian has to creep up on enemies from behind to choke them, and when patrolling guards come in pairs, two soldiers facing each other, every encounter with him in the lead becomes a puzzle.

The best of the puzzles see you manoeuvring the three heroes from A to B, coming to each other's aid along the way. Hanna's blowpipe takes the first soldier out unseen in the fresh shadows created by Alva and her slingshot. This frees Sebastian to sneak up on the

Developer River End Games
Publisher Nordcurrent
Format PC (tested), PS5, Xbox Series
Release Out now

When the stealth itself rises to the level of a set-piece – often when a maze of some form is employed – it really sings



CHARACTER ACTION

One of the neatest tricks in the game is the manner in which characters' personalities are revealed through their abilities. Hanna is the youngest and least experienced of the three and has to move delicately between shadows and time the shots from her blowpipe with care. The moment you first switch to Alva, a community leader from Eriksholm's slums, the game seems to grow in confidence, because Alva herself has a clearer sense of what she's doing. Traversal can be bolder, particularly when you can turn off any nearby lights at will. Sebastian, meanwhile, is powerful but needy. To pull off his choke move, he almost always needs assistance from his party members. It's a reminder that storytelling doesn't have to end with cutscenes.

second. *Eriksholm* is a hymn to the pincer movement. Throw in environmental elements such as metal flooring that amplifies footsteps or birds that scatter when disturbed and may alert patrols, and you have the basics for a decent set of gently cerebral challenges.

The UI is patchy, however. There's a clever system for being spotted by guards, in which a dotted line slowly connects the guard to you as they start to notice your presence, but view cones flicker in and out of existence too often to be useful. Equally, it can be hard to spot enemy patrols or interactive objects when the levels are so richly detailed and the camera is pulled so far back. Still, most of the time you can muddle through without too many irritations. Quick restarts allow you to make mistakes and try out unusual strategies. And despite its rough edges, *Eriksholm* shows a firm understanding of the thing that divides great stealth games from the merely good: rhythm.

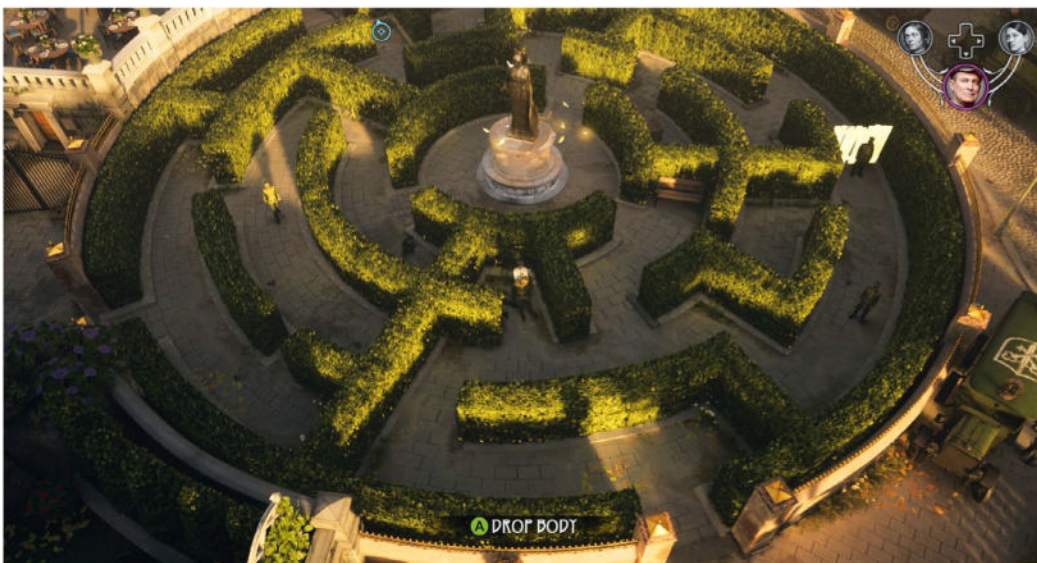
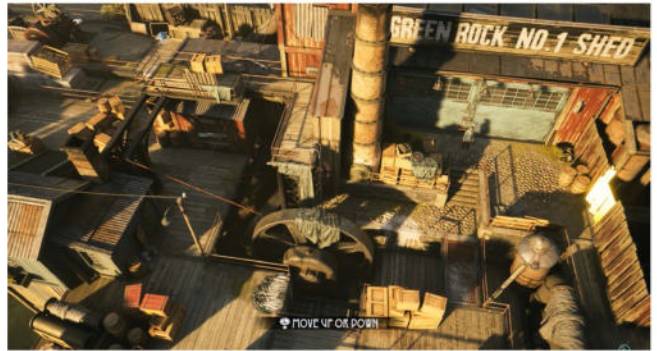
This sense of rhythm is baked into the best levels. It's not just a case of memorising the meter of patrols and the points at which enemies pause or turn back on themselves. In some levels the reliable arcs of a roving searchlight might sweep back and forth, forcing you to work with that light as you race between shadows. One particularly clever sequence has you hiding behind the noble bulk of a passing train, whose chugging also obscures the sound of your running feet. At its best, playing *Eriksholm* can feel like managing a music sequencer, with each of your heroes being an individual melody on the scrolling timeline.

The design falters a little now and then. The aforementioned underground sections are a bit of a warren-like slog, and the game takes its sweet time with introducing the full team at your disposal. Levels throughout the campaign can be ever so slightly too long to be played comfortably in a single sitting, and when stealth is abandoned in favour of set-piece puzzles it's never particularly enjoyable. One of these moments, deep beneath the city and involving levers that control water levels, swiftly becomes busywork. Another, involving factory machinery and battery packs, is merely a little tedious. Fortunately, there are fewer of these interruptions than you might initially be led to expect, and when the stealth itself rises to the level of a set-piece – often when a maze of some form is employed – *Eriksholm* really sings.

There's something to be said for this approach. Yes, the ideas are simple and well-worn, but they're treated with care and elegance, with a shimmer of luxury sprinkled across the top. As a series of toytown vistas to be poked around in, the game is a delight. As a reminder that stealth is so inherently thrilling that it can be comfortably reduced to its basics, *Eriksholm* isn't too far from a revelation.



ABOVE Cutscenes provide a rare chance to enjoy some beautiful, and rather soulful, facial animation. For most of the game, however, the people you're moving through the world are viewed more like ants



TOP Erikschold shines when you're moving across sunlit rooftops, navigating rickety walkways and ducking into the cover of shadow wherever possible.
MAIN The game loves to throw you up against two guards in close proximity, meaning that weapons such as the blowpipe will still trigger the alarm when used.
LEFT Mazes bring out the group dynamic in the characters you control, with their varied placement allowing you to control different parts of the labyrinth

Wheel World

For many of us, the humble bicycle will have represented our first taste of freedom. An opportunity to strike out on our own, unsupervised and untethered from home, across fields, into town, or (depending on where you grew up) around an industrial estate. While *Wheel World* combines the fantastical trappings of haunted bikes with the lingo and Lycra of modern cycling enthusiasts, more than anything else it plays as a tribute to that youthful feeling: *here's a bike, here's some open space — go nuts.*

The machine itself is simple enough to control, with acceleration on the right trigger — a consistent press, no need to manually pump the pedals — and braking on the left. There's a bunny hop controlled by pulling back on the stick, plus a boost fuelled by tricks and near misses, but the majority of your time will be spent with the core mechanic: turning the handlebars with the stick and balancing brakes and pedal to match the turn ahead.

For all the simplicity of this interaction, care has been taken over its feel. There's the right sense of weight to the bike, hefty on the corners, light as air as momentum carries you downhill. As a steed, a bicycle is like a horse spliced with a giraffe, elegant at top speed on a downhill straight, ungainly if you slow down — and *Wheel World* captures that, for good and ill. Despite the spectral energy powering it (remember, this bike is haunted), the speed boost is a convincing expression of how it feels to be in the saddle with the wind whistling in your ears and the pedals unable to keep up. Equally, getting back up to speed after a crash feels clumsy — just as it should. But this can become frustrating when said crash was a result of your bike clipping on something it shouldn't have or the camera failing to keep up, which are both common occurrences.

Of course, a bike is nothing without a landscape to point it at — and *Wheel World's* Tramonto condenses the dream of cycling across Europe into one island. A couple of minutes' riding can take you from Tuscan vineyards dotted with cypress trees to yellowing fields where La Manchan windmills dominate the skyline. Meanwhile, at Tramonto's heart, dusty roads give way to hard tarmac, introducing a city that blends these pan-Mediterranean influences in a single location. Here you'll find stone walls with the undulating line of Gaudí architecture, and brick houses decorated by washing lines, hemming in narrow streets occupied by a cavalcade of poorly behaved traffic. You can practically smell the mingled exhaust and cigarette fumes, the undertone of espresso. It's a tourist's caricature of the continent, but a loving one, rendered in a cel-shaded style, like a version of *Sable* inspired by Hergé as much as Moebius.

Structurally, meanwhile, the game owes a debt to *Breath Of The Wild's* Hyrule. You begin on an introductory islet, before being set loose in this wider world, with a boss at each corner. The difference is that,

Developer Messhof
Publisher Annapurna Interactive
Format PC (tested), PS5, Xbox Series
Release Out now

You can practically smell the mingled exhaust and cigarette fumes, the undertone of espresso



FIXIE UP, LOOK SHARP

A few of the parts you can buy do represent more meaningful changes to your bike — if only in appearance, with novelty cosmetics including a hotdog-shaped chassis and a genuinely horrifying set of human body parts. More mechanically consequential are the parts that offer a perk (generally increasing your boost in some way) and the trains that introduce gearshifting. This could've been the cherry atop *Wheel World's* simple cycling, but it never quite feels right, perhaps because the effect is only obvious when you're doing something wrong, or because the inputs sit in an odd place on the controller's shoulders, requiring finger contortion to shift up a gear without taking your foot off the pedals. Fixies are the only choice here.

while you *can* push out in any direction as soon as you arrive, each region's champion has an entry requirement: a set quantity of Rep, earned through races with lesser cycling clubs found around the map. These courses are woven neatly through existing real estate, a little feat of level design with the side benefit of introducing you to spots you might want to return to explore freely later.

Wheel World feels most comfortable in these races, lending your cycling a clear target, enhancing the sense of speed by giving you a peloton of rivals to overtake, and pushing Joon's pulsing soundtrack (the game's secret weapon) higher in the mix. The boost system has clearly been designed with races in mind, too — while jumps and swerves through traffic will keep it fed, nothing fills the meter like drafting behind another cyclist, the gentle effect of their slipstream tugging you along as you concentrate on finding the perfect moment to hit the nitro and leave them in the dust.

Outside of these big-ticket races, you'll encounter drop-ins: coming up alongside a fellow 'Lone Wolf' cyclist, you can ring your bell to turn the current stretch of road into a racetrack, good for 30 seconds or so of intense competition. There are also ramps to be found and jumped off, pursuits that have been a fixture of open-world vehicle games since ancient times. The remaining activities, however, aren't much more than a box-ticking exercise — quite literally.

Bell Shrines are your standard Ubi open-world towers, though in a winning touch they're activated by ringing your bike's bell to send an echolocation pulse out across the landscape. They also extend your boost bar, and tick off another space on the 'Sidegigs' menu — loyalty cards, essentially, filled out with each jump, Lone Wolf race and lost NPC. The reward is currency to spend on parts for your bike, allowing you to tweak its four stats (acceleration, top speed, handling and grip), generally by boosting one at the cost of another. Once we're free of the rickety starter equipment, though, these stat changes don't feel especially tangible, and we end up sticking to the middle lane of four-way balance.

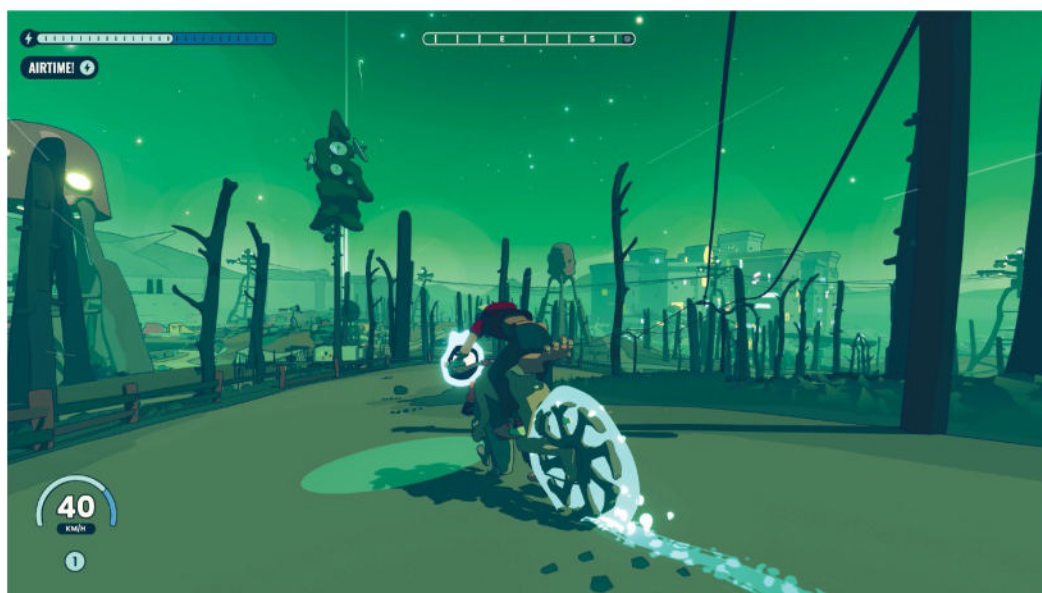
While it's initially exciting to explore *Wheel World* with just a pair of wheels and an agenda of your own making, that summer-afternoon aimlessness soon begins to go flat. By the time the second map is revealed, an industrial underworld that inverts Tramonto's sunny charms, we're unable to really appreciate the way its sharp corners make for more challenging races. Instead, it's just another batch of collectibles and challenges stretching out to the dark horizon, with a Rep target that's more than doubled. A perfect mimesis, perhaps, of the way our relationships with bicycles can morph in adulthood, becoming the preserve of the commuter and the courier. But it's only been a few hours, and we're already longing to come home again.



ABOVE As well as gaining Rep for finishing first, you earn additional Rep for completing bonus objectives in races. Each track has three letters to collect, *Tony Hawk* style, and a 'Tom's Time' record to beat – which often means leaving your rivals half a lap behind.

RIGHT The underworld gloom, smog and neon-lit tower blocks flip *Wheel World's* original aesthetic on its head, pushing the cel-shading in more of a *Jet Set* direction.

BELOW You'll encounter some Lone Wolf cyclists doing loops of the same roundabout – the resulting ad hoc race is just a case of finding the correct angle and holding it



ABOVE While there are cars in Tramonto, this is a world where bikes reign. Every NPC you encounter is a cyclist of some stripe, whether they're obsessing over their watt output or challenging you to a race to the pub

Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound

Kenji, the lead character in *Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound*, has a hard time accepting that he might have to work with a member of the Black Spider Clan. Frankly, as a series newcomer, he doesn't know the half of it. We've killed plenty of Black Spiders over the years, but only for self-preservation, whereas they've acted with bloody-minded brutality (peppering us with sticky explosive shuriken, for instance, or pulping us with last-ditch suicide attacks when they should be dead), and we aren't yet ready to forgive. But that's the lot we're dealt here as Kenji meets Black Spider Kumori and the pair's fates are entwined.

Their relationship status is very much a case of 'it's complicated'; then, which isn't something we're used to in *Ninja Gaiden*, where Black Spiders usually deserve no more consideration than demonic fiends. And while it's hard to grumble about shades of grey in any story, we're not quite sure this is place for it. Similar could be said for the katana-and-kunai action platform game our duo must fight through, where modernising additions detract from a core arcade-like purity. It's complicated, in short, in ways it needn't be.

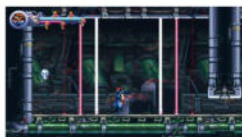
There are two parts of *Ragebound* that we enjoy most. The first consists of the game's opening chapters, before Kenji and Kumori meet, where we initially take charge of the Hayabusa Clan's latest raw talent, then the Black Spider assassin. Once through Kenji's basic training, the action quickens to a delightfully relentless pace. Demonic enemies rush on screen or jump from the background to perform their specified attacks – a straight rush towards you, perhaps, or a leaping strike, or the lob of arcing scythes – and fall to a single katana slice. From the start, as a sticky ninja, you can climb walls and cling to ceilings then progress hand-over-hand across gaps. Jumping is a touch over-sensitive, but in the right way, as if you've been charged with calming the excesses of an exuberant acrobat, especially with your 'guillotine boost' that enables you to bounce off the heads of foes. With Kumori, levels flow at an even faster run-and-gun pace thanks to her rapid-fire kunai.

The second part of *Ragebound* we very much enjoy is its approach to bosses. These are classic examples of the form – matters of pattern learning and incremental improvement built on firm but fair tests of timing and accuracy. They're fun to fight because of the clarity of their onscreen presence and the requirements to beat them, and also because they provide opportunities to use one of the game's key techniques, the hypercharge attack, in ways that make sense.

Because, outside of boss battles, hypercharge often feels like an idea that doesn't quite gel with everything else. It appears as a somewhat contrived curiosity when it's introduced in Kenji's training level, and never quite convinces us that it isn't. To become charged you need

Developer The Game Kitchen
Publisher Dotemu
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

The pixel art and simulated chip music find that sweet spot of feeling 16bit while being so much more



GREATER NINJA

The option to retry a level you've just finished is a clear sign that The Game Kitchen has built this game to be replayed. Indeed, every stage provides targets for speedruns and kill counts, plus bespoke challenge tasks (such as not falling into pits) along with collectable scrolls, crystal skulls and gold scarabs. You're also given an overall rating at the end of a level, with certain grades necessary to add new stocks of special weapons and buff-giving talismans to the between-level shop. You can also buy talismans that penalise you, removing mid-level health refills, say, in exchange for a grade boost. For those who enjoy repeating stages until layouts and enemy placements are burned into memory, *Ragebound* could have a long life.

to hit any enemy that's (arbitrarily) circled with an aura, after which your next attack is, well, hyper-charged. In boss scenarios, projectiles or minions are most often aura-ringed, and you have to act quickly to hit one. But if you do, you can stun the boss and snip away at its life bar unhindered for a few seconds. During levels, though, a hypercharge amounts to a handy instant kill against stocky, immobile foes who possess shields or the constitution to withstand several blows. The aim is to keep charges ready for such obstacles, so that they can't stall your momentum, but the potential puzzle element of ordering attacks to link together aura absorption and hypercharge kills struggles to emerge. In most instances you come across a bulky demon or shielded soldier, wait for a regular enemy with an aura to show up, and then butcher it and its larger pal. Sometimes the aura arrives late, so you kill the elite opponent the old-fashioned way, with multiple hits, rendering the exercise pointless.

And if hypercharges don't gel with the game's rhythm from the start, they only feel more offbeat once Kenji and Kumori collide. At this point in the tale, both are mortally wounded and trapped by an arch-demon, and the only recourse is for Kumori to kill herself with a magic kunai that places her spirit in Kenji's body, pulling him back from the brink. With that, two characters become one, and while their odd-couple bickering within Kenji's corporeal form has its moments, the neatness of the early stages is compromised by mashing them together. Now you have sword, kunai and an extra Black Spider weapon to juggle, with use of the first charging up spirit energy to fuel the others. Now there are two different-coloured auras in play at once, and you only gain hypercharge if you destroy them with a matching attack type.

As your enemies continue to storm in, their linear patterns combining to increasingly devious effect, *Ragebound* is most entertaining when you're reacting rather than thinking, parsing the identity of each sprite and adjusting course instinctively. Yet too often there's a thin film of strategy wrapped around it that's more restrictive than refreshing, and as complexity stacks with the intricacy of the stage design, a cluttered control system struggles to keep up – accidentally grabbing walls in tight spots is a problem. Time-limited sequences created for Kumori to tackle alone in spirit form, meanwhile, follow a rote cycle of die, memorise, repeat.

There is still plenty to like. The pixel art and simulated chip music find that sweet spot of feeling 16bit while being so much more. The pace remains quick, enemies are varied, and long platform levels are punctuated by breezy chases. In other words, *Ragebound* sparkles when it doesn't over-egg the pudding, confusing additional layers for mechanical depth. And we remain convinced that, whichever clan they're from, the best ninjas work alone.



ABOVE While you battle hell fiends for a good portion of your journey, the CIA also ends up getting on your bad side. It's a chance to reprise some of the battles against military hardware from the first Xbox *Ninja Gaiden*

MAIN You can hypercharge at any time by sacrificing a portion of health, but it's not an option we ever find much reason to take.
ABOVE Find hidden scrolls in levels and you can unlock special-ops missions – new levels set in locations you've already visited.
RIGHT Level design is varied and tightly arranged overall, but only on occasion manages to impart a sense of real invention or spectacle



Shadow Labyrinth

Going by the 1980 arcade original, Pac-Man can be just about anything. The pixel graphics are spare to the point of abstraction, with the features of our favourite hungry yellow circle defined only by the art on the side of the arcade cabinet. One piece of Atari box art envisions him as a sort of track runner with a lithe, humanoid body, while 1984's *Pac-Land* imagines a globular yellow fellow in a feathered cap. Bandai Namco's baffling *Shadow Labyrinth* offers the most dramatic reinterpretation yet: as a dime-a-dozen floating companion character.

Pac-Man joins a long line of robots, fairies and sundry sentient beings who flit through the air spouting exposition or suggesting what you ought to do next. The game redefines the character as Puck, a yellow drone stranded on an alien world. She (Puck is coded as female – perhaps more of a Ms Pac-Man tribute) summons an avatar in Swordsman No. 8, a cloaked figure with a floating mechanical arm, to wield the mighty ESP sword. As No. 8, you are the finder of secrets, fighter of bosses, acquirer of upgrades to reach new parts of the map – in other words, the archetypal Metroidvania star.

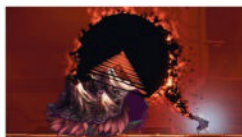
Shadow Labyrinth is a reimagining that is, fundamentally, a de-imagining; you are finding journal entries, parrying enemy blows and spending currency to upgrade your attack power. It is the subtraction of what makes *Pac-Man* distinct and the addition of things from other games: here is a mech, a sword and an anime girl in a bodysuit. That the story plays all of this straight is at least admirable – there is not a single wink or chuckle to be had about the fact that Puck can transform into GAIA, a mech that has a big Pac-Man head as its torso and snatches carcasses to stuff into its maw. That's how you get crafting materials, after all.

But being more than a little trite is not the game's only sin, nor is it the worst one. The far greater problem here is the constant, flagrant disrespect for your time, from the glacial pace at which upgrades are doled out to the sparse checkpoint placement. Where other games in this crowded subgenre provide a drip-feed of new abilities and equipment, it takes five hours for *Shadow Labyrinth* to fork over the ability to parry. By the time you've got a respectable suite of traversal options (air dash, grappling hook), the hour count is north of 15.

The pacing is made worse by the unforgiving combat, and the glee with which the game boots you back to a respawn point. We often die hunting for the next crystalline save point; these are scattered with little regard for whether you'll have to repeat a gruelling platforming challenge or combat trial. *Shadow Labyrinth* may not be a particularly inspired title, but it is accurate given the intricate networks of branching paths that house enemy ambushes, HP upgrade tanks and even the occasional save point. One path through a zone is often as viable as another, particularly as the levels start to

Developer/publisher Bandai Namco
Format PC (tested), PS5, Switch,
Switch 2, Xbox Series
Release Out now

This is a game of nuisances, of backtracking to an area with new equipment and realising you also need something else



EVERYONE IS HERE
Shadow Labyrinth has ties to Amazon's Secret Level CGI shorts based on games, which floated the idea of a gritty sci-fi *Pac-Man* before the game was properly unveiled. That episode is a prequel of sorts, following Puck and one of Swordsman No. 8's predecessors. The real story, however, is *Shadow Labyrinth*'s place in Namco's United Galaxy Space Force (UGSF) myths, which loosely connects *Ace Combat*, *Galaxian*, *Dig Dug*, *Bosconian* and more. References abound in lore entries, location names and enemies, with a clever inclusion of foes from *Galaga*. It's all in good fun, and the only thing worth noting about the game's narrative, which does not approach the grimness of the Secret Level episode but otherwise takes its mythology quite seriously,

open up, which would be admirable if so many of these paths weren't so miserable to travel. At least death doesn't cost you a portion of your spoils, because each lengthy trek back is punishment enough.

Almost every mechanic is tuned in favour of busywork and adding insult to injury. For example, the meter for using the GAIA mech is governed by how many enemies you've devoured, which is fine in the heat of combat but irritating for the handful of obstacles that require use of GAIA and thus require you to hunt for critters to munch on if your mech meter isn't already full. Likewise, you end up with a surplus of crafting materials because there's hardly any use for them, and some of the drops are determined by chance – tough luck if you've sucked down the carcass of a crab mini-boss and got only the common loot to show for it. Maybe try fighting it again. This is a game of nuisances, of backtracking to an area with new equipment and realising you also need something else. Even the attack upgrade feels negligible.

Still, despite *Shadow Labyrinth*'s best efforts to undermine itself, there are moments when it all clicks. The combat has enough pyrotechnics and thundering sound effects to satisfy our cravings for spectacle, and the platforming is a high-flying joy once you start mixing air dashes, double jumps and the grappling hook. More than at these points, though, it works best in the few moments when it's not doing an impression of better games. When you touch a neon rail, the controls switch over to Puck, who chomps forward in autonomous *Pac-Man* fashion and even eats dots to the classic *wakka-wakka* sound effect. She's also more acrobatic, capable of leaping between tracks or over obstacles. These sequences feel distinct and fresh in a way the rest of the game is not, and several of the cleverest moments involve Puck bounding across rails.

The brightest highlights are the ghost-filled maze levels scattered throughout the world, which beam you into a new incarnation of *Pac-Man Championship Edition DX*. These are thrilling five-minute affairs, with long trains of ghosts to be eaten to a thumping soundtrack. Seamlessly integrating the platforming elements of the base game, you hop across blocks and sail through speed boosts, your manoeuvres tearing away pieces of the maze and throwing them at the face of a giant ghost shooting missiles that are smaller ghosts.

True to form, it's maybe eight hours before you're allowed to enter these mazes – perhaps because they highlight the lack of identity and personality elsewhere – yet, ultimately, there's a good *Pac-Man* game buried beneath the hours of *Shadow Labyrinth*'s trend-chasing mediocrity. We only hope we're not reading too much into the fact that these mazes are plastered on slabs that look like tombstones.



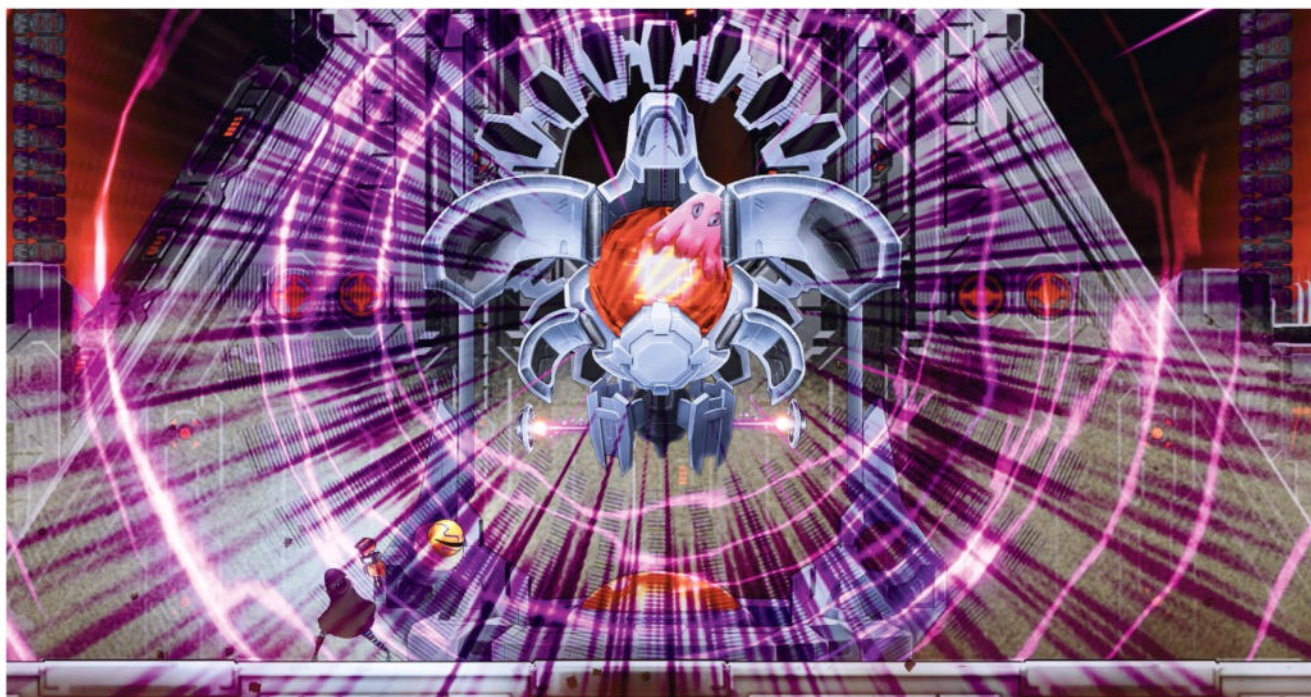
LEFT With a quick click of the analogue stick, you'll summon the GAIA mech to devour fallen foes and dispense crafting materials.

BELOW Guiding Puck along neon rails comes with its own unique platforming challenges, from roving buzzsaw blades to sentry bots with red vision cones.

MAIN Several of the game's boss encounters recast the classic multicoloured *Pac-Man* ghosts as parasitic G-HOSTS, now fused with fearsome weaponry. This particular one goes by the name of Guileness Laia rather than Pinky



ABOVE The alien planet requires you to travel over land and under ground, crossing all manner of crystal caverns, desert peaks and industrial zones. Your destination? A giant black tower where Puck's mortal foe awaits



The Wandering Village

Typically, city builders find fascination in the way layers of infrastructure depend on and support each other, in such a way that after a few hours playing *Tropico* or *Cities: Skylines*, you feel a sense of wonder that there's water flowing readily from your taps when you pause for a bathroom break. Some of that's true of *The Wandering Village*: there's an inherent stress in juggling the constant and escalating needs of a growing population in an expanding settlement. But where usually the payoff in such games lies in observing a ruthlessly efficient road network or particularly cost-effective piece of sewage management, here it's about imposing order upon a different kind of chaos — not only the manmade kind, but the chaos of symbiosis, eking out existence on the back of a giant living being.

It's an original angle. According to the story, a global extinction event has shrouded much of the world in toxic gas and whittled humans — or whatever species the denizens entrusted to your care may be — down to a few hardy survivors. Most of those who have survived have taken up residence atop a vast, quasi-magical creature called Onbu, which plods around a world map while you build logging camps and town squares along its indifferent spine. Success in *The Wandering Village* means balancing meeting the needs of the human population with meeting those of Onbu. Sometimes those needs are in sync: toxic air is bad for both, and should be avoided by diverting Onbu's path on the map. Sometimes they're not, such as when the beet harvest fails and you have only a few mushrooms to feed your people, and since they're Onbu's food source too, you force the poor creature into an intermittent fasting diet.

Stray Fawn explores that premise in three ways. Most substantial is the Story Mode, which centres on a strange, ruined antenna-like structure on Onbu's back which can be repaired and used to communicate with characters from a surprising array of places and, indeed, times. It's not lore-dense stuff, serving mostly to drive you to work through the substantial upgrade tree and explore the myriad ways of managing a growing population. You do have memorable encounters with oddball survivors along the way, such as the hermit who's preoccupied with finding his lost pigeon, but we'd have liked to see more done with *The Wandering Village*'s eccentric characters, with richer backstories to explore and more specific objectives that steer you away from the critical upgrade path. As it is, they're simply momentary changes of pace that let you know a new objective's coming.

Survival Mode strips away the narrative pacing and simply challenges you to keep both settlement and Onbu alive for a journey of 1,000km. In this environment, meeting Onbu's needs comes closer to the fore, and it's the most curious part of the game. The game log tells you microscopic details about the creature, from its

Developer Stray Fawn Studio
Publisher Stray Fawn Publishing, Whisper Games
Format PC (tested), PS5, Switch
Release Out now

'Serve the people or serve the gargantuan cryptid they're living on' is refreshingly new ground



WINDING ROAD

Much of the action happens on Onbu's back, but as you zoom out from the settlement view, you're taken to the world map where it roams. Here you can send scavengers out to nearby landmarks to gather resources or collect quest items, and do some forward planning for the biomes you're about to enter. Each crop has an ideal temperature, and as you shift between desert and jungle areas, farms should adjust their output accordingly or risk a famine. It's here at this tranquil distance that *The Wandering Village* looks the most visually pleasing, and where the universe feels at its most mysterious and worthy of investigation. Then a housing crisis breaks out, and the wonder is sidelined for another bout of menu jockeying.

heart rate to the speed of its current metabolism, and exactly when it relieves itself. All of these biomarkers have a strategic knock-on effect. Its droppings can be harvested and converted to biogas and fertiliser. Its metabolism determines how often it needs to eat and sleep, and if you're currently travelling through an aquatic area in which Onbu has limited opportunities to lie down on small islands along the way, that's also worth paying attention to.

The upgrade tree itself, sprawling as it is, is revealed over time to be two upgrade trees: one for Onbu and one for your settlement. Min-maxing isn't a viable strategy here; you'll always need to consider the needs of both. And that's how you find yourself wringing your hands over whether to research salt curing to keep food stores high while you travel into climates that aren't good for your farming industry, or an Onbu Discipliner that does what it says on the Machiavellian tin, forcing your steed to obey your commands at the cost of its trust in you, so that it doesn't walk you into an inhospitable climate in the first place. City builders and management games are about dilemmas, but 'serve the people or serve the gargantuan cryptid they're living on' is refreshingly new ground.

Sandbox, the third game mode, explores that new ground most rigorously. Here you can impose 15 different modifiers on yourself to make the challenge spicier, including a cold snap that kills off all berry bushes for the game's opening, or an 18-hour happiness nerf called 'Cloud Of Despair' that puts your villagers in a bad mood whenever Onbu voids its bowels. Enjoyable isn't quite the right word for these experiences — in the moment, dealing with them feels like renewing a car insurance policy on the day it expires, on a phone whose battery is running low. But they are worthwhile explorations of *The Wandering Village*'s premise. In sandbox mode you feel the push and pull of each party's needs the most keenly.

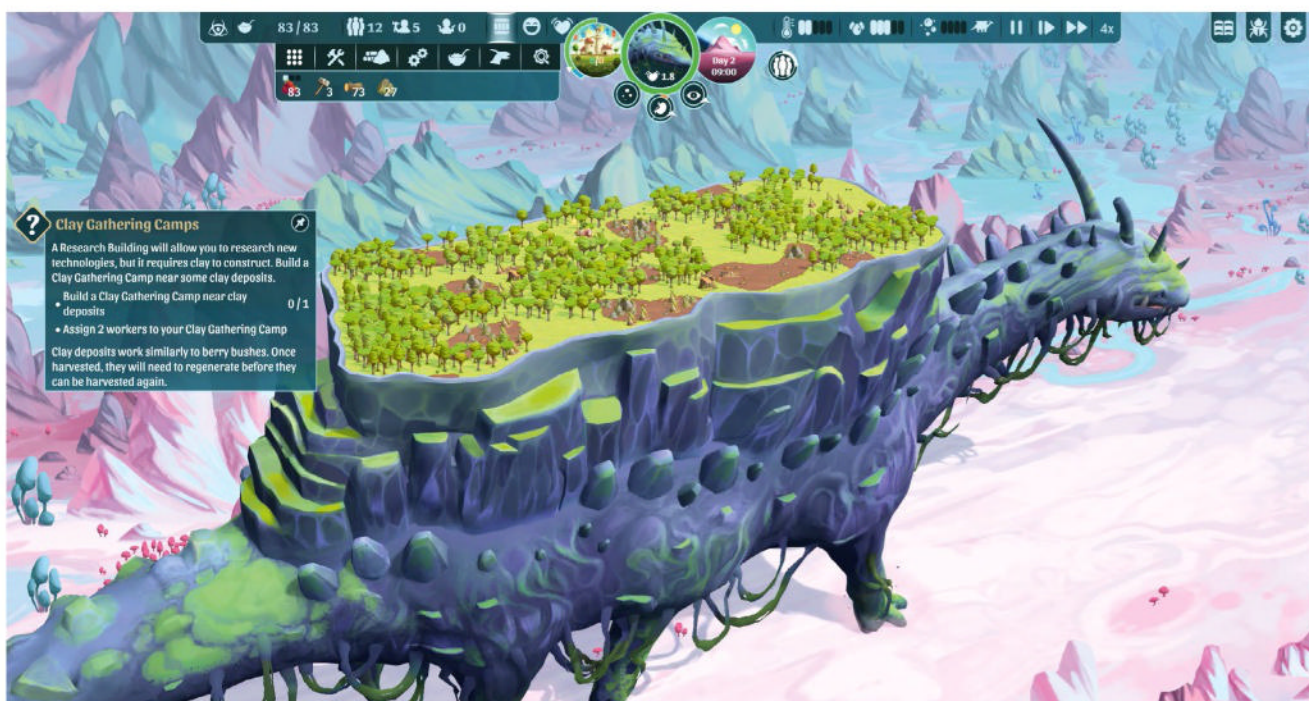
Yet, modifiers or not, the stakes remain low. This isn't a game that apes *Tropico*'s fearsome complexity or *Humankind*'s era-spanning scope. It's telling a smaller story, on a vastly smaller budget, and it largely succeeds on a mechanical level, except for small grievances, such as the odd red-flag alert being given when a building's resources are at capacity (not really a problem, or worth diverting your attention to). But if its execution is a modest success, that's because its ambitions were modest in the first place. Deeper storylines, developed characters or a greater variety of more impactful events might have elevated it, and may yet, during its post-release lifespan. Right now, there's enough here to capture the imagination for a handful of playthroughs, but for *The Wandering Village* to go the distance, Onbu may have to shoulder additional burdens.



LEFT Zoomed in, the contrasting art styles of wispy Ubisoft platformer and irreverent Double Fine adventure come together.

MAIN Zooming out to watch the massive Onbu plodding through curious rolling landscapes is one of the game's most obvious joys.

BOTTOM Instructing Onbu to sleep at the right moment has numerous knock-on effects, such as how well fertilised your crops will be



ABOVE An extremely small central cast of two village elders propels the plot forward by communicating with people in the wider world via a satellite tower they restore. There be temporal plot twists ahead



Tales Of The Shire: A Lord Of The Rings Game

Making a game about being a hobbit – inviting friends over for meals, gardening and farming, wandering the woods in search of mushrooms – would seem a natural fit with the proliferation of slice-of-life farming games hanging on the coattails of *Stardew Valley*. And in some ways, it is. *Tales Of The Shire* is buoyant and brisk. It has just enough subsystems to tickle the mind, while mostly abstaining from the deep economic systems that have defined the genre of late. But given the game's rich source material, and developer Weta Workshop's hands-on experience with the Lord Of The Rings films, it's a shame it doesn't differentiate itself more from others of its ilk. Like a hobbit, it rarely leaves its comfort zone.

Events here precede The Lord Of The Rings, taking place a few decades before Frodo's fateful journey to Mount Doom. You'll encounter characters from Tolkien's books, such as Gandalf and Rosie Cotton (the young hobbit who eventually marries Sam Gamgee), but for the most part this is a story of daily life in a forgotten corner of Middle-earth. You name and customise your own hobbit, who's relocating from the town of Bree to the rural Bywater. As you're settling into your new home, Bywater discovers that it's not officially ranked as a village in the hobbit census (it's labelled merely a district of Hobbiton). The population enlists you to make it a village for real. So while you tend your garden, decorate your hobbit hole and fish in local ponds and rivers, you also complete favours for the rest of the village and scheme with them over shared meals.

Each of these systems feeds into the next. Fishing, foraging and farming help you craft better meals for your fellow hobbits. The better the meals you make, the faster you'll build relationships with them and the faster you'll unlock fishing spots, rooms for your home, or items to buy. However, you can only plan and cook one shared meal each day. You can only plant certain plants when they are in season. Even the 'sprint' button triggers a leisurely skip. In other words, there's no rushing, even if you want to hurry. Life is simple. The seasons will roll around again.

What you won't find here, refreshingly, is the economic engine that drives the likes of *Stardew Valley*, where every day ends with a spreadsheet detailing your gains. There's much less sense of that need for obsessive optimisation here, disguised as an escape from capitalist drudgery. *Tales Of The Shire* does have a similar screen, but instead of displaying the economics of your farm, it shows the relationships you've progressed and the ingredients and plants you've discovered. Money does change hands, and you'll need it to deck out your home and garden, but the game goes to pains to de-emphasise financial growth as a motivator for play.

Still, it's not entirely immune from some of the genre's less wholesome trends. Through the main plot,

Developer Weta Workshop
Publisher Private Division
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

It's a shame it doesn't differentiate itself more from others of its ilk. Like a hobbit, it rarely leaves its comfort zone



WATCH THE BIRDIE

Although performance is unstable in its present state, the game also has touches of real craft. *Tales Of The Shire* has a map screen, which updates with realtime information on the locations of other hobbits, where to forage for ingredients, and so on. But when you set waypoints, there's no minimap to follow – instead birds will appear, perching on archways, trees and stones in the direction you should be going. It's a touch that keeps you present in the game's world, and allows you to take in the sights of the Shire while ensuring you won't get lost. It takes just a few in-game days before we intuitively know our way around Bywater, and watching our little hobbit traipse around this corner of the Shire creates a feeling of embodiment.

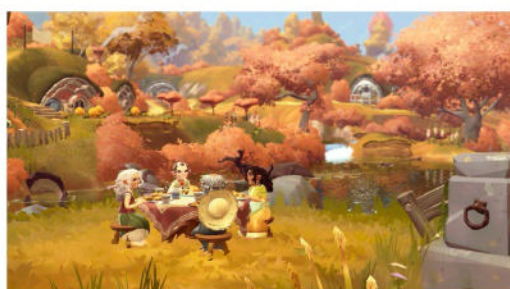
you join clubs for each of its major activities: foraging, gardening, fishing and cooking. Each club has a challenge list, requesting you to, say, pick eight penny bun mushrooms or cook a stew. Once introduced, these challenges begin to make your pottering feel more like work. It's harder to relax when the game's systems are tapping you on the shoulder, asking when you'll fulfil your quotas for the month. Sure, you can ignore these challenges – every fish caught or plant harvested fuels progression in the relevant club – but it takes much longer to level up clubs this way, so the pressure remains to engage with those more dogmatic objectives.

The look of the game reflects this slightly uncomfortable balance as well, as if it isn't truly at ease with itself. When the season first transitions to autumn and the hilly Shire decays into sunset oranges and reds, it's gorgeous enough to prompt a gasp. At the same time, though, the watercolour palette can give the world a rather muddy appearance – it's a look that pulls on a sort of cartoonish impressionism, but it lacks the stark quality associated with that style due to its excessive detail. At its best, *Tales Of The Shire* can feel like wandering through a dense woodland. There's the sense of a vibrant, generous ecosystem all around you. Yet beneath the careful rendering is a shortage of coherence or compositional aims. At times, it's like walking into a Thomas Kinkade painting with a cartoon filter applied.

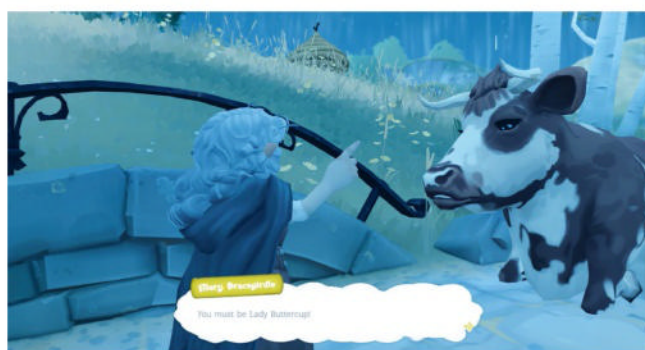
There are technical issues, too. We lose progress repeatedly thanks to frozen screens or fades to black that never load back in. One hobbit sometimes appears submerged underground except for the top of his head, like Gollum swimming through the waters of Moria. Even on lower settings, the framerate stutters.

If that hardly makes you feel welcome, however, what most hampers *Tales Of The Shire* is its resolute friendliness. In fairness, hobbits can be prickly on occasion, if you're bothering them about a lost item, for example. Nevertheless, you *will* make friends with every named hobbit in Bywater. They can only ever be briefly miffed at you, and no relationship will take a wrong turn into antagonism, as we might expect from the books and films. Missing here is any recognition that the Shire has become a memorable place because it's populated by both kind-hearted people and more insular specimens.

That said, in a strange way this feels somewhat closer to Tolkien than the dark fantasy of *Shadow Of Mordor*. It captures the more parochial, folksy elements of Middle-earth better than many games have managed. If all you want here is to fish in a scenic pond as the sun sets over the hills, it would be hard to think of something more vivid and relaxing. But it rarely becomes more than a pleasant distraction, rather than something that feels warm and real.



ABOVE The game's shared meals are moments when you can take a breath. You'll watch each and every hobbit you invited dig into their meal with gusto, and get a few Instagram-friendly shots of the countryside



MAIN You play as a newcomer to the Shire, a hobbit who has spent most of their life among both men and fellow little folk.
ABOVE Various animals mill about the Shire's countryside. You can't pet them, but they'll do something cute for you if you greet them.
LEFT The fishing minigame is a little simple, but it's a reliable source of early-game income

RoboCop: Rogue City – Unfinished Business

Teyon had a rock-bottom moment with its licensed *Rambo* game in 2014, which disappointed in part because it was a rail shooter, not the FPS players expected. Over a decade on, though, having played *RoboCop: Rogue City* and now this pseudo-sequel, it's hard not to feel that on-rails is what Teyon does best.

Unfinished Business is an FPS, but with its faithful interpretation of the metal lawman, Teyon nonetheless creates a kind of tunnel vision. RoboCop cannot crouch or jump in the way most FPS heroes are able to nowadays. He's slow on his feet, footsteps clumping like an industrial-grade stapler, and pans his view by rotating his whole torso. He thus relies on his armour as much as he does on cover for defence, but most of all he's reliant on sharpshooting, to stop violent criminals before they strike in the first place.

The result is a gamut of shooting galleries, in which you aim to pop off heads (or limbs) before soaking up too much heat in return. And if this is already where *Rogue City* did some decent work, *Unfinished Business* adds an extra lick of polish and audacity. Minus the mundane police work of its predecessor, the action is more sustained here, which encourages Teyon to add more variety. Yes, there are still countless turkey shoots,

Most of the game is set inside a single, giant OCP tower, which has been taken over by a veritable army of mercenaries. It's a plot that recalls the films *Dredd* and *The Raid*, and gives your quest a singular focus

Developer Teyon
Publisher Nacon
Format PC, PS5 (tested), Xbox Series
Release Out now



AUTOMATIC CHOICE

RoboCop's default auto-9 pistol is a beast, and as in *Rogue City* you can beef it up further in a minigame arranging chips on a circuit board. Yet this power presents a problem: why would you use anything else when you've always got *that* to hand? The game does offer some solutions – heavy pistols punch through armour better, while machine guns quickly clear a room – but it's telling that a sequence where your sidearm is lost is one of the most tactically interesting.

but also set-pieces and enemy types that push you to try different routes or approaches, or place you in memorable locations – one sequence set amid mock Wild West scenery feels like a classic saloon-bar shootout. The audiovisual feedback is that bit more thrilling too, as are cheeky touches such as ricochet shots that let you target enemies dug in behind cover.

It's a shame, then, that when it comes to simulating humans rather than cyborgs and guns, Teyon continues to struggle. The shooting-gallery analogy also carries here because enemy AI is severely limited. Some goons do use cover, but almost all are too static, staying in position until you blast them out of it. Then, out of battle, characterisation and dialogue in sidequests and flashback episodes are weak, as are the character models themselves. The activities you're asked to indulge at such points feel like childish distractions, and if Teyon has got the tone of RoboCop right, it's yet to grasp the satire of the original film.

But at least there's less of the narrative mush to wade through this time, and if we start to flag late on, much is forgiven when *Unfinished Business* grants us control of an ED-209. This mini-mech trip is a power fantasy inside a power fantasy, *Virtua Cop* with a minigun and a rocket launcher. It underlines both how far Teyon has come since *Rambo*, and that it still needs to master shooting off the rails.

6



The Drifter

Fate could have dealt Mick Carter a kinder hand. An unexpected catastrophe prompts him to abandon what remains of his family and start wandering a dystopian, near-future Australia, as if grief is something he can simply outrun. This muddled attempt at reprieve then stretches into weeks, months, years, with no word of explanation to his wife, Sarah, who's left to grapple with both their son's death and Mick's disappearance. That is, until a message from his sister, Annie, informs him their mother has passed away. Determined not to miss another funeral, Mick hops onto a freight train headed for his home town. But when he's discovered by a belligerent security team, our stowaway dies for the first time. Then he returns and the hallucinations start.

Powerhoof's first full-length point-and-click is a sci-fi thriller that's mercifully free of the genre's worst excesses. No moon logic to stump you for hours forcing peeks at a walkthrough, only sensible puzzles and a complex, dialogue-driven story peppered with neatly arranged twists. Animated in the developer's trademark chunky pixel art and split into nine roughly hour-long chapters, *The Drifter* tasks you with investigating a series of unethical experiments on the homeless, kidnappings by a secret military organisation, and a serial killer

Mick is initially unaware of his time-rewinding capacities, but as his investigation into quantum cognition expands, he becomes adept at escaping perilous situations – albeit with some experimentation on your part

Developer/publisher Powerhoof
Format PC
Release Out now



COLD APPETISER

Powerhoof's Steam back catalogue contains only a couple of titles, but dig deeper, into itch.io's chest of curiosities, and you'll discover *The Drifter's* direct predecessor. *Peridium* is a claustrophobic chamber piece set in an Antarctic research lab, into which the protagonist has locked himself after observing changes in his companions' behaviour. Reminiscent of *The Thing*, *Peridium* tells a compelling story of paranoia and reaches its shocking climax in less than 15 minutes.

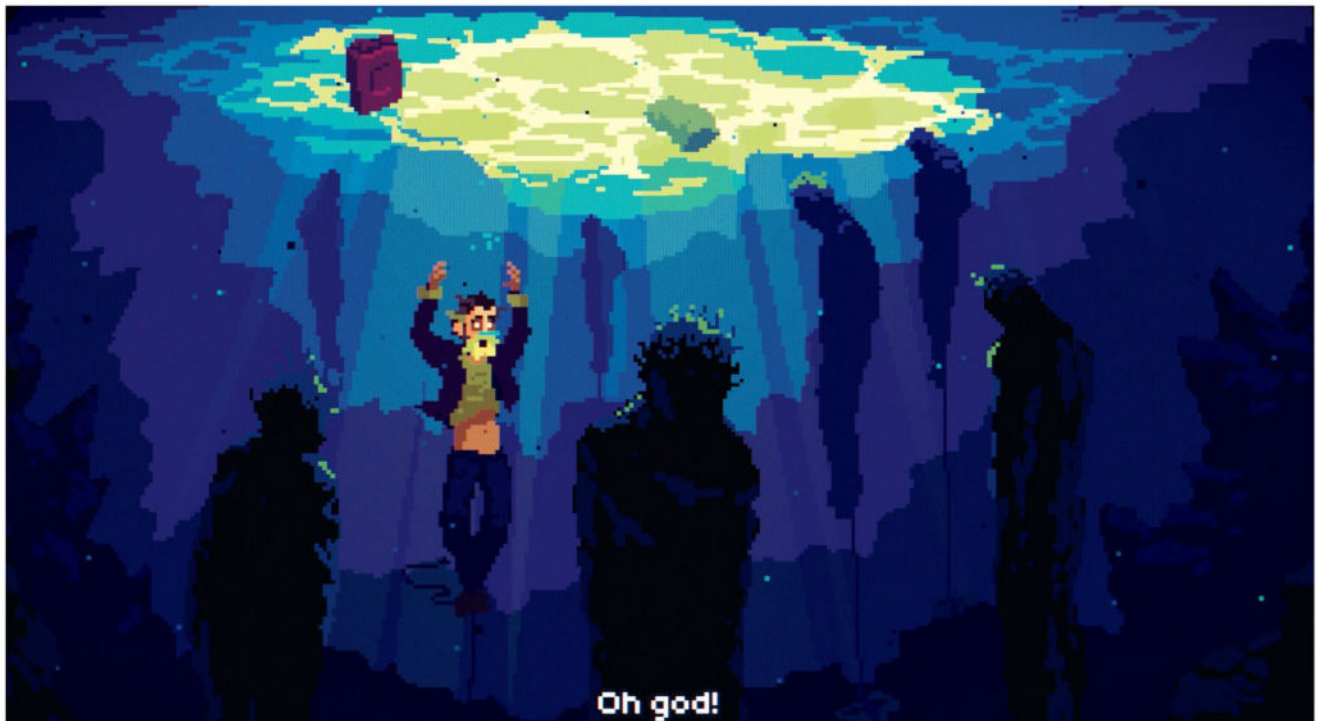
prowling the streets – all linked to secret research into time travel through something called 'quantum cognition'.

An intriguing, horror-tinged parable of loss and acceptance is elevated by convincing performances, most notably Adrian Vaughan's Mick, whose gravelly voice channels a degree of urgency bordering on despair, as if his every action represents a struggle against destiny. Equally impressive is the economy of design; a fairly limited set of locations (including a cemetery overseen by an ill-tempered keeper and newspaper offices where a receptionist dreams of becoming a novelist) is renewed after every major plot development with subtle scenery changes and fresh dialogue options, so that revisiting environments never feels like retreading your steps.

The same efficiency is missing from some of *The Drifter's* attempts to exploit its core time-travel conceit, however. These typically involve a dangerous situation, during which Mick may die repeatedly, requiring very specific sequences of actions to survive, potentially leading to multiple repetitions of a two-minute scene. The aim is to create suspense, but (barring a memorable late-game escape) such moments mostly frustrate.

That aside, though, by juxtaposing a hero who retreats in denial against an antagonist who'll go to any lengths to change the past, *The Drifter* offers a poignant take on trauma, and the ways it keeps gnawing at the soul the longer we refuse to process it.

7





Hollow Knight

As the wait for Silksong nears its end, can the original justify all these years of anticipation?

By ALEX SPENCER



Developer/publisher Team Cherry Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One Release 2017

Higher beings, these words are for you alone. So begins the first inscription you discover in Hallownest, and then many others thereafter, a hint that its message is aimed not to characters in the world but the player. You might detect a touch of flattery here, then. And, in fairness, if you first read those words in early 2017, then you'd have every right to feel a little smug – because if you weren't quite alone in playing *Hollow Knight* back then, you were certainly in a minority.

When Team Cherry took its debut to Kickstarter in 2014, the campaign attracted just over 2,000 backers, falling short of its loftier stretch goals (including a PS Vita port and the promise of a third playable character). When the game hit 65,000 sales in the first month after release, the small Australian studio was ecstatic. Now that seems rather parochial.

Eight years and millions of sales later, we live in a world where Nintendo and Sony broadcasts are assailed by cries of “*Silksong* when” in the live chat, and that sequel – originally conceived as an expansion to introduce that *second* playable character – has almost passed into myth. After another summer of announcements without any solid news on *Silksong*'s release, there's a growing sense that all the hype could curdle.

Just what was it about this game that caused such excitement to spread in the first place, and managed to sustain it for so long? We fire it up for the first time in years and begin a fresh save. Might its appeal have been blunted by the many imitators that have followed? Emerging a few days later with 30 hours and a completion rate of 95 per cent under our belt, we're relieved to report that *Hollow Knight* has still got it.

It's a common complaint that *Hollow Knight* gets off to a slow start. Your bag of tricks is all but empty, consisting of just a jump, a basic sword slash and a healing ability. Accordingly, the first threats you encounter are the game's least dynamic – bugs that move slowly and predictably, rarely bothering to attack – and the arena in which they're faced, the Forgotten Crossroads, the

least visually appealing. Knowing what's to come, though, even these monochromatic caves and creatures feel purposeful.

As you begin to edge into adjacent regions, there's a striking change of palette. To the right: brittle pink light, given off by formations of crystal. Down and to the left: febrile green, with enemies that fizz bright orange. In those early hours of groping around in the dark, we rely on these associations to navigate. Even after acquiring our first map, it's a skill we must return to, every time we enter a new area and have that luxury stripped away. *Hollow Knight* is ready to withhold the good stuff: visual splendour, core mechanics, or any obvious direction towards an objective. And that only makes you crave it all the more – the engine driving any good Metroidvania.

Indeed, given this genre's recent ubiquity, it's tempting to suggest that *Hollow Knight* succeeded simply because it got there first. True, it was immediately preceded by *Axiom Verge*, *Guacamelee* and the first *Ori*, but only afterwards did the floodgates truly open. Whether that's a case of capitalising on an existing player appetite or creating one, you'd be hard pressed to argue that Team Cherry didn't nail the genre fundamentals, search and action alike.

Hallownest is a world well worth exploring, densely packed with shortcuts and cavities, their discovery yielding a satisfying chime and most often a pocketful of the game's currency, Geo. You learn to pay close attention, keeping both eyes and ears open, since the very best rewards are generally accompanied by a distinctive audio cue. Absentminded humming can be followed to Cornifer, Hallownest's not-so-silent cartographer, while youthful squeaks indicate that there's a caterpillar grub in need of rescue – just don't be tricked by the wickedly similar sound of the explosive kamikaze Belfly.

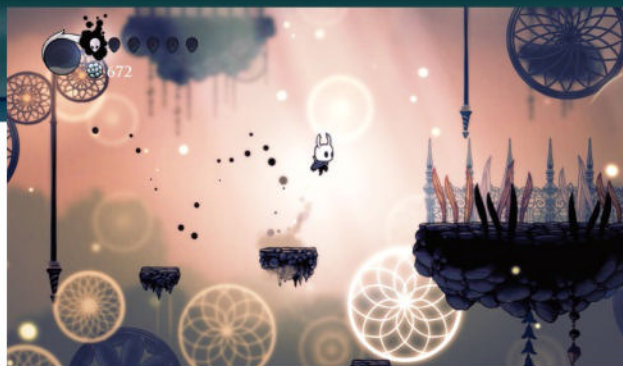
Soon enough, you'll come up against unbreakable barriers, and spot goodies in unreachable spots. (The way a grub's excitable squeakings turn to a disappointed sigh as you miss the jump is brilliantly heartbreaking.) These teases are fuel to the trusty Metroidvania engine, pushing you deeper in search of the ability that will eventually grant you access. And so your movement options are expanded from a ▶





single jump to long chains of directional dashes, wall slides and mid-air hops. Not the most innovative abilities, perhaps, but they almost all pull double duty as tools for both traversal and combat.

While it's the platforming that still accounts for the most deaths early on, over time *Hollow Knight*'s challenge increasingly shifts towards the swordplay, with progress gated behind multi-phase boss encounters. This being a game made in the mid-2010s, it's all but impossible not to draw a parallel with the work of FromSoftware. The developers have since said they'd hardly played *Dark Souls* or its kin at the time; rather, both studios were working from a similar set of influences leading them towards similar design decisions, Soulslikes themselves being a weird offshoot of the Metroidvania family tree. It'd be easy, for



Beyond such narrative concerns, in terms of design it's worth noting where the two diverge. Die, and you'll drop your current supply of the game's most valuable resource, be it Geo or Souls, necessitating a corpse run back to a dangerous spot lest they're lost forever. But Team Cherry ratchets up the tension further still, by requiring you to defeat your own shadowy spectre in combat once you reach it – and to do the whole

Among the abundance of optional side challenges here, only those involving the Dream Realm ever feel at all extraneous

TAKEN AS A WHOLE TODAY, THE GAME FEELS IMPOSSIBLY HUGE, PROMISING SOMETHING NEW AROUND EVERY CORNER

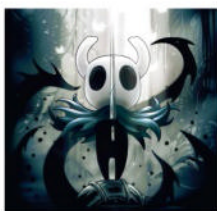
example, to liken Hallownest's benches to Lordran's bonfires – both allow you to save progress and top up health and supplies, inspiring a similar relief when found – but in truth they share a common ancestor in *Super Metroid*'s Save Stations.

Elsewhere, though, this kind of convergent evolution can produce uncannily specific resemblances with no obvious forebear. Both FromSoft and Team Cherry build worlds in which Lovecraftian horrors rub shoulders with Arthurian chivalry, the latter's code of honour and – in the case of an Onion Knight or Dung Defender – even jolly demeanours providing a rare spot of optimism in a land where not every NPC is quite so friendly. Hallownest and Lordran are both dark places which nonetheless interrogate the traditional notion of 'light equals good':

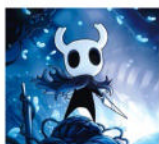
thing with restricted access to healing, due to the cracking of your Soul Vessel.

Rather than a limited supply of Estus Flasks topped up at save points, here you heal by drawing on this gauge, charged with each strike that lands. Thus, your Soul supply is likely to dwindle to nothing then rally multiple times over before you arrive at the next bench – and given how it is refilled, you have added motivation to engage rather than evade enemies en route. This feeds into combat that, à la *Bloodborne*, dares you to be aggressive. There's no shield here, and the only way of parrying is by launching a well-timed attack, in the hope that your blades will ping harmlessly off one another.

This all makes for a perfectly solid example of the form – or rather the *forms*, Team Cherry having spliced together the



The Knight's design balances cuteness – the big head naturally inspiring protectiveness – with the eeriness of a blank stare



PUT A PIN IN IT

Cornifer's maps are incomplete, showing only the rough boundaries of spots he's been able to visit himself, sketched out in dithered pencil. We initially take this for the sign of an unsure hand, but perhaps he's just a businessman, since the map's other functions are each sold separately. A quill allows you to update the map based on your own exploration, while the Wayward Compass tracks your location (while equipped, in a slot that could otherwise be used to boost combat prowess). Best of all are the custom pins that can be placed freely on the map, their colours signifying whatever you decide. It's hard to imagine playing *Hollow Knight* without them, yet they were added a year after launch. Unlike Cornifer, though, Team Cherry didn't make us pay for the privilege.

While character animations are simple, clever use of sound, flash and particle effects ensure you feel the impact of every strike



Hollow Knight gradually reveals your true goal but in retrospect the clues are there – albeit obliquely – from the very beginning

Metroidvania and Soulslike, intentionally or otherwise, in a way that makes the appeal of each clearer to players coming from the other side of the genre tracks. But this alone, surely, can't account for the staying power of this game? The real magic, we'd argue, comes in what is built atop those foundations.

Every single part of *Hollow Knight* oozes with personality. The maps are diegetically rooted by the physical presence of their maker, and the scrap of paper in the Knight's hands as you study the menu. We collect grubs less for the Geo reward than the backstory implied by their father, sobbing, in an empty room. Later, when a collapsing floor drops you into the very nastiest corner of the map, the point is underlined by perverting these bright spots: Cornifer cowers in fear, while those cute little caterpillars transform into Cronenbergian horrors that rush for your throat.

The fundamental pleasures in which Team Cherry deals here – mastering a space or fight that once seemed impossible – provide a framework from which it can hang hundreds of these magic moments, ready to lodge in the memory. Returning to the Crossroads deep into the game, you'll find it overtaken by infection, with old routes blocked off and the familiar enemies replaced by more fearsome variants, all of it hitting harder because those sombre greys and blues have been overwritten by sickly orange – a payoff that might take dozens of hours to arrive. It's a similar story with NPCs: repeat encounters with Quirrel the Knight, Millibelle the Banker and Zote the Mighty each build to their own payoff, humorous or tragic or both at once.

Many of these moments were already present in *Hollow Knight* as it arrived back in 2017, while many more were added over the next 18 months in the shape of free updates. Taken as a whole today, the game feels impossibly huge, promising something new around every corner. Even with our completion stat at 95 per cent, we're still a way off the final, post-DLC total of 120 per cent – and still have the appetite to get there. It's a timely, encouraging reminder of why we've all been so hungry for more, and of what might be taking so long for it to be served up. If the higher beings at Team Cherry have spent all this time threading *Silksong* with as many memorable moments as its predecessor, it should be more than worth the wait. ■





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70

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T H E L O N G G A M E

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



Destiny 2: The Edge Of Fate

Developer Bungie Publisher SIE Format PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series Original release 2017

What is *Destiny 2* in 2025? As in the parable of the blind men and the elephant, it depends on who you ask, and nobody has the full picture. Those with thousands of hours of play under their belts with a regular squad may still consider it a daily event, with deep lore and compelling weapon RNG. The less-frequent flyer may find a pleasing loot shooter, albeit beneath a bit of a mess. For a newcomer, it's probably impossible to tell trunk from tail.

For a game that reached new peaks last year with an expansion called *The Final Shape*, the irony is that, overall, *Destiny 2* has become rather shapeless. There are quests that split off into subquests that split off into sub-subquests, and the way forward – in every sense – is often unclear. To its credit, *The Edge Of Fate* takes tentative steps to simplify things, but then more confident ones to complicate them further.

The new Portal page provides an effective, if visually uninspiring, funnel to new content, and gear upgrading has received welcome streamlining. These are effective tweaks, but only really a few branches broken from the overgrown forest, especially when you consider that *The Edge Of Fate* introduces two new currencies and a new approach to armour that sees everybody's Power level reset.

The launch build seems less stable than usual, presenting some progression-blocking bugs, plus audio glitches on PlayStation, but the core experience also has room for improvement. The story hits some interesting notes, usually when it touches on its time-travel aspect. The game it's woven into can't keep pace, however. The most egregious example is Matterspark, which transforms your Guardian into a ball of light. This captures the body but not the soul of *Metroid's* morph ball – after eight years, you suddenly find yourself needing to access tight spaces to progress. It's overused in simple puzzles, traversal and combat, up to and including the final boss fight. But even when not in thrall to this new mechanic, *The Edge Of Fate* is neither as exciting as *The Final Shape* nor as aesthetically striking as *The Witch Queen*. Combat encounters and environments alike feel overfamiliar.

With no new Strike on offer, and activities that only unlock upon completion of the campaign, solo players will need to power through several hours before gaining access to new matchmade content. While the most dedicated will find plenty to gorge on there, others may struggle. There are pleasing additions – a gun named Last Thursday, for instance – but there's no clear destiny in sight. ■

#415

September 4





