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#275
JANUARY 2015

We have all of the options – now all we need is the time

As the year draws to an end, it's worth looking back at some great games 2014 gave to 3DS, Vita, 360, PS3, Xbox One, Wii U, PS4 and PC. On top of those, there were thousands of iOS and Android titles to pick through. And when you weren't playing, there was of course **Edge** to read, along with blogs and other websites, not to mention Twitch streams, YouTube channels, Tumblrs, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds to consume. Even the heartiest appetite for game-related morsels is catered for in a world with so much content stuffed through so many pipes, which makes time feel like our most valuable resource. We cannot beat the clock, and that's why it's been a surprise to see even more demands on our attention arrive in recent years, as a trickle of game-related book releases has turned into a rush. Not so long ago, the question was: where aren't there any good books about games? Now it's: with so many books about games available, which ones should I be reading? The answers can be found in this issue's features section, which rounds up some of the best examples out there today. Good luck with fitting them into your schedule.

This year has seen the old-fashioned regulations of the clock weighing heavily on a number of big game releases, stripping *DriveClub* of many of its key features at launch, inflicting *Assassin's Creed Unity* with an Internet's worth of memes, and pushing the launch of *Batman: Arkham Knight* into the middle of 2015. Deep into production, developer Rocksteady faced a decision: reduce the game's scope, or bargain for more time? Fortunately, its publisher, Warner, opted against compromise, and the results, as detailed in our cover story, look set to reward that faith.

Getting back to the topic of reading, from this issue onwards **Edge** is available to also buy on Android, giving you the same experience as the traditional edition, only considerably less papery and in a format that will take up literally no room whatsoever in your bag. Visit bit.ly/edgesub for more details, or to sample our award-winning interactive iPad edition.

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Getting ahead in the cloud

How Square Enix plans to realise the promise of server-based game processing with Shinra

Over ten years since the foundation of OnLive, cloud gaming remains an enticing yet frustrating concept, often touted as the industry's future yet checked by infrastructure considerations beyond the industry's control. The possibilities continue to dazzle: armed with on-tap server support, creators of cloud games are in theory unconstrained by the capabilities of client devices. Due to enter beta testing early next year in Japan and the US, Square Enix's own Shinra Technologies is built around a familiar vision of bold new games brought to life by the boundless might of a server farm – a vision of massively multiplayer shooters that feature hundreds of moving objects and unprecedented degrees of realtime environmental deformation.

For all the airy talk of unrestricted access to power, however, neither startups such as OnLive and Gaikai, nor established players, most notably Microsoft, have managed to overcome the limitations of the Internet itself. Bandwidth allowances may have rocketed since broadband became the norm, but variable latency means that time-critical tasks such as graphics

rendering and types of game that rely on minimal input delays simply aren't practical by way of the cloud.

How does Shinra stand apart from these services? In that respect, at least, it doesn't. Announced in September under the leadership of Yoichi Wada, who stepped down as CEO in 2013 as part of company-wide reforms, the service is, at heart, an educated gamble about how the Internet will evolve. "When I speak to Ericsson, Horizon and all those large companies about where they're taking the network, improvements to latency are coming," says senior vice president of technology **Jacob Navok**. "We made a prediction that the network would get better," adds senior vice-president of technology **Tetsuji Iwasaki**. "We're not looking at where it is today, but where it will be in several years."

This is hardly inspiring after OnLive's promise met real-world performance considerations, but if Shinra runs the same risks, it does take a more holistic, creator-driven approach to how games make use of the cloud. Where many services so far have served primarily as a platform for publishers' back catalogues, Shinra's tools are the result of extensive collaboration with the developers of forthcoming games, including *Just Cause* studio Avalanche and Japanese creator Kengo Nakajima. Rather than simply making it easy to port over old software, the more advanced of its development kits are designed to help teams take advantage of server processing resources

that can be scaled up and down on demand. It also handles the associated calculations more efficiently due to a modularisation strategy that, among other things, erases the synchronisation delays that are often the cause of crippling lag.

Iwasaki's work on Shinra began with the idea that supercomputer-grade servers could be made available to developers at a fraction of the expense by using general-purpose components while improving how they communicate. He recalls a lecture by Professor Tsuyoshi Hamada at Nagasaki University in 2009, who had managed to assemble a $400,000 supercomputer using Intel GeForce GPUs that ultimately proved more powerful than the Earth Simulator, a supercomputer built in 2004 by Japan's government to study the effects of climate change.

Performance, Iwasaki explains, isn't directly proportional to cost, and streamlining how components interact delivers greater returns than a fortune's worth of bespoke high-end kit. He cites the capabilities of new network cards, which can transmit a file of 1,024 bytes between servers in 46.6 microseconds – equivalent to memory read/write speed 10–15 years ago – using technologies such as InfiniBand and remote direct memory access, which allows computers to bypass OSes and drivers in order to tap directly into each other's memory.

The speed with which the results of calculations can be shuttled between ▶

> "We made a prediction that the network would get better. We're not looking at where it is today"

Shinra is being run separately to Square Enix's other operations to avoid being slowed by studio politics or established thinking. It will, however, borrow Agni's Philosophy

Shinra's senior VP of technology, Tetsuji Iwasaki, and its SVP of business, Jacob Navok

servers enables a radical distributed approach to processing. Rather than being handled entirely by one machine, Shinra's games are broken down into modules such as AI and rendering, which are then processed across its network of servers. We're shown footage of a standard setup of four CPU servers and two GPU servers, which is capable of running 60 sessions in tandem – a mixture, in our particular case, of Eidos Montreal's *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and Io-Interactive's *Mini Ninjas*.

This modularisation allows

Shinra to freely alter the ratio of CPU to GPU servers for a particular game – a title that features lots of physics calculations might use more CPUs but fewer GPUs, for example. And this in turn means that Shinra's games aren't limited by the capabilities of any one server. "You can have hundreds of gigabytes of memory," Navok promises developers. "You can have an entire server process devoted to a single explosion. You can have a CPU's entire clock dedicated to powering your AI."

A second benefit is that because every Shinra user's session is processed in the same place, there are none of the synchronisation delays associated with traditional online multiplayer, in which data about players, objects and the environment must be ferried between machines thousands of miles apart. Iwasaki draws a parallel with splitscreen multiplayer in *Mario Kart*: "This architecture uses that concept. We just send the screens separately to the users. All calculation happens in one process, so no synchronisation is needed."

This allows for online multiplayer games that support thousands of moving objects – hitherto highly impractical, since the synchronisation delay makes it impossible to ensure that each object appears in the same place for every player at any given instant.

We're shown an example of this in *Space Sweeper*, a mixture of 2D bullet-

> "As a creator, I have my own dreams for what kind of games I'd like to see built with this"

Space Sweeper's assets may seem primitive when seen in stills, but it's more complex than it looks. It draws on a 'Virtual MMO' theory devised by its creator, Kengo Nakajima, and runs exclusively on Shinra

hell shooter and exploration game from Kengo Nakajima: it will be among the experiences that launch with Shinra's beta. Another beta title is Agni's Philosophy, the fearsome Square Enix tech demo from E3 2013, allowing users to fiddle with metrics such as follicle growth while the demo's sequence unfolds. Using Shinra's servers, it may even one day be possible to algorithmically alter such details in realtime without breaking the resource budget – an enticing prospect, but not one we'll see realised soon. "We don't think this will go in that direction for the next few years because the cost is too high," Novak says. "But once procedural technology really takes off, we could start procedurally generating rendering."

Fold the advantages of an entirely server-based processing loop together with Shinra's promise of scalable access to CPUs and GPUs, and you're left with dramatic ramifications for the MMOG in particular – a genre with which Iwasaki is intimately familiar thanks to his work on *Final Fantasy XI*, the most profitable in the series to date. Square Enix has struggled

to replicate that success with the initially disastrous *Final Fantasy XIV*, but perhaps Shinra's tech will ensure that its next attempt is more appealing.

Another proof-of-technology demo allows four players to explore a forested map that's supposedly 17 times the size of *Skyrim*'s, populated by a thousand AI creatures. Pulling back the camera reveals that all the creatures are rendered no matter how far away they scattered across the world. "*GTA Online* has data just around you, so if you go somewhere and come back, all the broken objects will have disappeared," Iwasaki says. "But we can keep everything, because all the calculations are happening in one process." Created by three people in six months, the demo is ostensibly just a glimpse of the promise here. More advanced MMOG worlds that run on Shinra might support realtime terrain deformation and fluid physics during realtime combat scenarios, allowing lagoons to form as rainwater fills the craters left behind by warring mages.

If it aims well beyond currently available cloud gaming services, Shinra's prospects may be shaped by much the same mundane commercial pressures – baldly put, even if latency ceases to be a major concern, it'll take a really great

game to demonstrate that distributed server-based processing is a trick worth learning. In this regard, its fate lies in the hands of its undisclosed partners, who apparently range from tiny indies to heavyweight studios. "It's not in the creation of the technology itself that I've felt challenged," Iwasaki says, "but in solving the chicken-and-egg problem of which should come first, technology or content. So to destroy that problematic cycle, I did not want to put out a software development kit and see who would come, but build it alongside developers who want to create something new."

It's this receptiveness that perhaps distinguishes Shinra from Square Enix's other tech experiments. Shinra is, of course, the name of the power-mad energy corporation from *Final Fantasy VIII* – a self-deprecating choice of moniker that implies the publisher is mindful of the risks of seeking to impose a future on the marketplace. "Of course, as a creator I have my own dreams for what kind of games I'd like to see built with this," Iwasaki concludes. "But what I find more important is that creators who are frustrated with the limits of the single CPU-GPU chipset should be able to make the kinds of games they want with this tech. That's what I'm really hoping for." ∎

The focus is on PC right now, and a select group of PC users with high-end Internet connections at that, but apparently working with console manufacturers and mobile phone providers is a possibility in the future

FAST FORWARD
While streaming a video feed to players is less burdensome for a developer than dividing calculations between a client device and the server, there's still latency to account for. According to Jacob Novak, Shinra's server-side efficiency will free up around 40ms to put against any lag that arises from the user's connection quality. "When we take what we're rendering, plus encode, plus decode and Internet latency," he explains, "we end up with a total loop that's actually half of a console's rendering loop." This feat notwithstanding, Shinra will only be available via fibre-optic connections, at least to begin with.
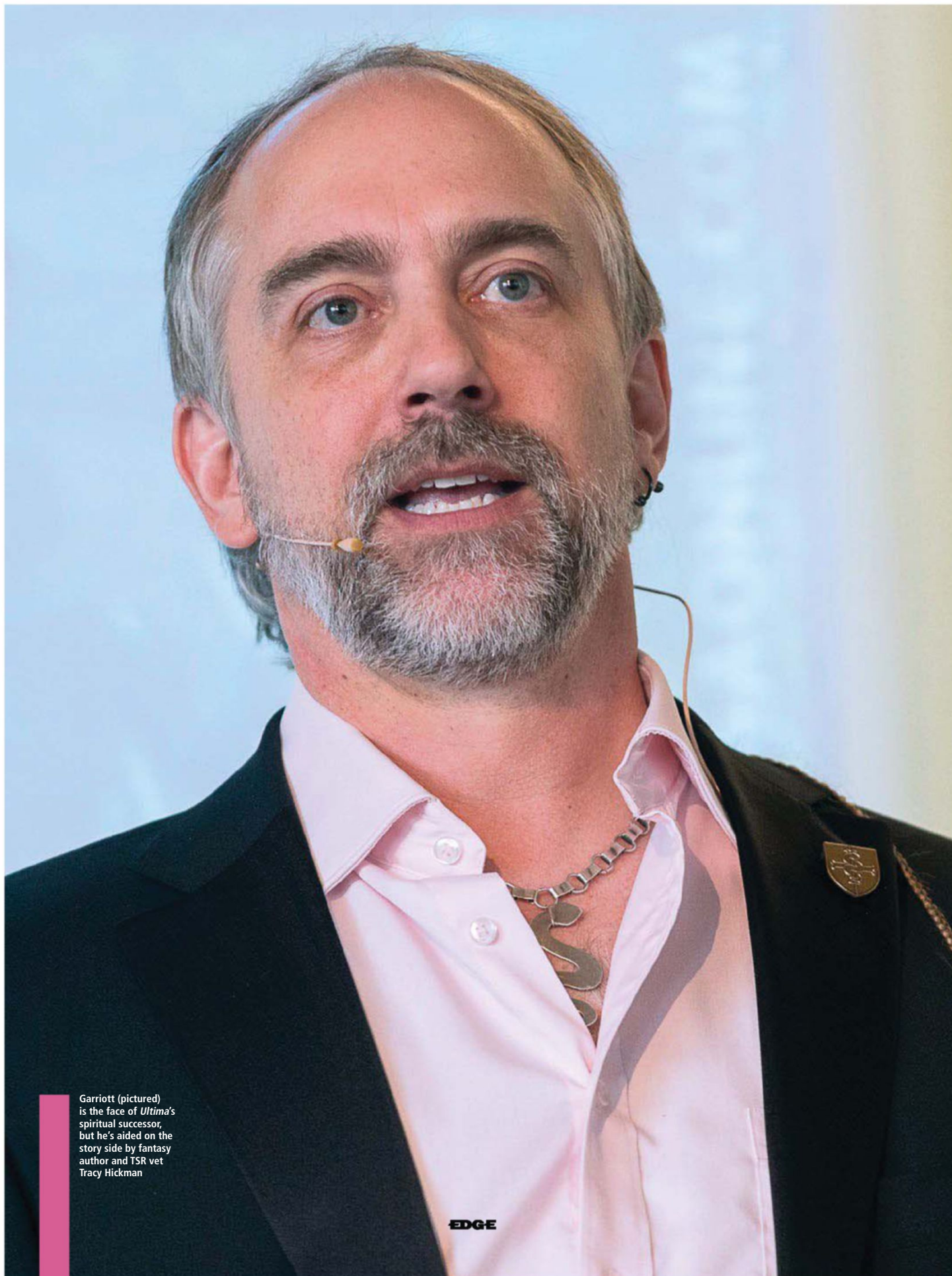
The return of Lord British

Richard Garriott talks **Ultima**'s spiritual successor, testing morality, and designing for crowds

The *Ultima* series is the stuff of RPG legend. Ten main games (and a clutch of spinoffs) have been set in the world of Britannia, where moral quandaries are as important as hitting things with swords, and virtue, rather than strength, is the mark of a hero. Its seventh instalment, *The Black Gate*, is widely considered one of the greatest and most influential RPGs of all time, with even modern RPGs such as *Divinity: Original Sin* being measured against its depth and freedom.

Shroud Of The Avatar isn't *Ultima*. EA owns that licence. Its ankh-strewn world of New Britannia is intended to be familiar, though. "*Shroud Of The Avatar* is best described as the spiritual successor to *Ultima*," **Richard Garriott** explains. "It's combining deep, virtue-based narrative with a selectable level of multiplayer, from offline to something that feels like a traditional MMOG. It'll be interesting to see how people prefer to play, but I suspect even people who like a solo player experience will play online. We've created a story and technology that is highly compatible with having people in the world beside you, while you still have your unique journey to the right conclusion… The right one for you."

What separates an *Ultima* from most RPGs is that while there are beasts to be slain and glory to be gained, it's never really the point. "Not only were they generally about the Virtues and hopefully a positive commentary on behaviour, but *V*, *VI*, and *VII* especially were often referring to difficult issues and how to put them into a context where you'd be confronted with your own biases and bigotry," Garriott says. "I wanted to hold a mirror up to the player and expose their less virtuous side."

Arguably the most successful attempt was *Ultima VI*, whose demonic enemies – gargoyles – were an allegory for racism. "As you might imagine, I have to get trickier each time, especially with an MMOG environment," Garriott says. "I'm a believer in Bartle's four player types: explorer, achiever, socialiser and dissident. To create a good story about sociology, we need to accommodate all of those, including dissidents! Since that type of personality is guaranteed to exist, I think it's better to let those players express that…." He tells an *Ultima Online* story in which a thief preying on newbies argued against a ban on the grounds that he was roleplaying, and using in-game tools to do so. The logic was inarguable.

Things have progressed, though. "*Ultima IV* was fairly black-and-white, a landmark only because it was first," he admits. "This one, because we're trying to tell a deep virtue story online and offer multiple spins on the journey, has been very hard. Other games will, say, give you a dog and say what points you'll get for it… A game should not tell you how it's evaluating your deeds, because that lets you cheat the system. You're playing for points then."

Multiplayer is certainly adding complications, but as Garriott and the creators of *Divinity: Original Sin* have found, designing a game to be robust in company can be a boon for singleplayer stories, too, ensuring complex interlocking systems are designed with edge cases in mind. "We put in the PvP combat well in advance of the PvE combat, and a lot of our players were angry about that. But by doing PvP first, we can take real people and mete things out, and it's much easier to then allow the AI to inherit that. The same is true for the storyline. We can put in all the probes for the virtues and so on, and once we've seen how those numbers manifest in real use through casual behaviour, then it's so much easier to create events that trigger off them."

Shroud Of The Avatar is a five-episode series, where each new episode will tell its own RPG-length story and add new lands. But from the moment you start, you can wander off in any direction and do your own thing, again recapturing the spirit of *Ultima*, if not its specifics.

"At the beginning, I posed this treatise: what is a Lord British RPG?" Garriott says. "To me, it means a sandbox world where everything is interactive. Plate, cup, shutter, lamp: all those things should be interactive and, in at least one place, important. All the NPCs should feel real, go to work, close a door if you leave it open. Those aren't part of *Ultima* as a property, they're just good game design principles. What we're then trying to make sure we do is that while we're not bringing forward any of the history except my character, Lord British, we're trying to make sure we don't do anything contrary to my earlier games. That way, if people wish to imagine a continuity, it will be there." ∎

Dramatic intentions

Tribe Studios is trying to bring out the thespian in all of us

The term 'roleplaying game', although technically applicable to almost any game in which you embody a character, has taken on very specific connotations. As a genre, it emerged from the creative fantasies of tabletop games and early MUDs, but while it and the subgenres it has inspired have focused on combat, levelling, exploration and loot, the human interaction between those early pen-and-paper players has been sidelined in favour of comparatively rigid storylines. Tribe Studios wants to change that, and to this end has created a platform called Dramagame. Its ambitions for the tech are grand, too, the company aiming for nothing less than instigating a new genre.

"The tech platform is essentially the basis for being able to create a whole new media format and extending the sphere of games by another third," Tribe Studios co-founder **Ville-Kalle Arponen** tells us at Paris's Game Connection. "The number of possibilities in this area opened by using social skills as a challenge is immense."

Dramagame, then, refers to both the tech powering Tribe Studios' games and what it sees as a new style of gaming that focuses on roleplaying in the literal sense. *Velvet Sundown*, Tribe's first proof of concept, launched on Steam earlier this year after four years of development and drops between four and 11 players with different goals onto a luxury boat in the middle of the ocean. You might have to weed out a thief, perhaps, or work as a spy to recover vital intel from a rival corporation. But rather than click through multiple-choice dialogue trees, you're free to talk about, well, anything.

"If you look at games, they're normally intellectual challenges like puzzles, or they are about reaction speed

and accuracy," says Tribe co-founder **Elina Arponen**. "But in *Velvet Sundown*, and in our future games, it's a *social* challenge, where the interactions and discussions between the player characters actually affect the storyline. So it's kind of a truly multiplayer nonlinear story."

Of course, this kind of freedom risks abuse from the less-committed breed of online player, but this is where Tribe's interesting twist on free-to-play helps: rather than pay for content or missions, you pay to play with other paying players, thereby reducing the risk of encountering game-ruining trolls. But Ville-Kalle isn't entirely opposed to a little mischief.

"It's funny – a certain amount of trolling is, in a way, desirable," he explains. "If you go in there and be a real icicle up others' bums, then it probably won't be very fun. But if you have a sort of relaxed, slightly trolling atmosphere, then it will probably be fun and you'll probably be achieving your goals in a fun way."

During one session we played, we were cast as a spy disguised as one of the boat's staff. One of our personal goals was to discreetly recover a red thong we'd misplaced – a tad less important than the corporate espionage we were tasked with, but one that led to some amusing (and suspicious-looking) conversations nonetheless. Your ability to charm and negotiate are key to success in *Velvet Sundown*. While you have set goals, how you go about achieving them, and how you decide to manipulate other players, is entirely up to you.

"Essentially, our story mechanics are able to create borders that make everything that happens in the game coherent," Ville-Kalle says. "Of course, players can still try to break that if they want to, but even then it will remain an entertaining experience for everyone else. Obviously, if somebody decides to just chant, "One, two, three…" over and over for half an hour, as somebody did, then it's a problem. But I think that's really strange behaviour, because the game offers such a rich possibility to talk about all sorts of things."

"But this kind of problematic behaviour doesn't happen almost at all on the premium side," Elina says, "and if you find a group that isn't good to play with, you just try again and find a better match. Problem solved!"

Even in free games, the freedom to talk about whatever you want with other players who all have their own roles is intoxicating. Conversations don't exactly feel natural – especially given that players' lines are read out by robotic voices – but while *Velvet Sundown* might have rough edges, it does eliminate embarrassment from the process of getting into character and hamming it up.

"We believe this kind of thing will be in most games in the coming years," Ville-Kalle says. "If you think of a shooter, instead of just merely shooting people, you'd have some social hierarchies, team dynamics. So people would no longer be playing the game just for the shooting, but immersing themselves in the game and actually roleplaying the characters that they are playing inside that game. That opens up a whole new avenue." ■

> "It's a social challenge, where the interactions and discussions actually affect the storyline"

Ville Sohn

Elina Arponen and Ville-Kalle Arponen, co-founders of Tribe Studios

Because any subject is open for discussion, it's easy to get distracted from your mission goals and find yourself flitting between different conversations trying to establish relationships
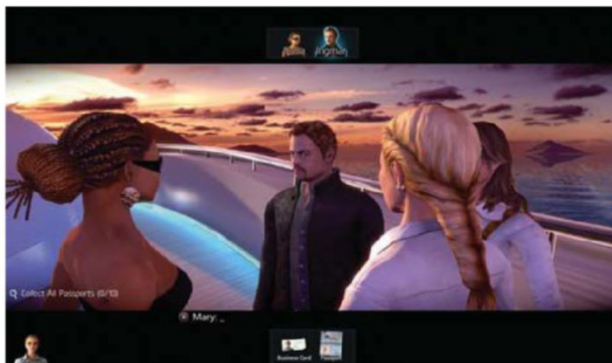
In order to talk with someone, or a group of people, you must request a conversation and wait for them to accept or decline to speak with you. You may find yourself rejected from a huddle because information is being shared that someone doesn't want you to hear

When we play *Velvet Sundown*, we note that it reminds us of *SpyParty*. "There are similarities in the asymmetry between the quests," Ville-Kalle says. "Both players are in the same world in *SpyParty* – one is trying to hide and the other is trying to pinpoint them. We're not doing the same thing, but in the same way most of our quests will be asymmetric. So I might be trying to steal your badge, while you're trying to get your fake badge swapped for a real one. Our goals might be sort of aligned, and stuff will happen because of that, but who's winning if you get rid of your fake badge and I end up with the fake one?"

CLAYTIME

How The Neverhood's creators recast the mould

While not a direct sequel to 1996's *The Neverhood*, *Armikrog*'s lineage is clear. Made by California-based Pencil Test Studios, using the same team of designers and animators – many of whom also worked on *Earthworm Jim* – this new adventure game uses a lot of the same techniques that powered Klaymen's tale but benefits from modern technology.

"The approach and work hasn't changed at all," says Pencil Test producer and ex-Ninja Theory creative director **Luis Gigliotti**. "But the software and cameras we use now make things look so much better. It's a dream, really, for the guys here to get to make a stop-motion-based game again. It's something we've wanted to do for almost 20 years."

Kickstarter made it possible, and the developers are working in plenty of references for their fans and backers. While the story remains a mystery, it revolves around the pair on this page, Tommynaut and Beak-Beak, who crash-land on an alien planet, get thrown in the titular gaol, and become embroiled in a far larger story. The team is currently moulding and shooting with a view to a release in early 2015 on PC and PS4. ∎

Why put so much energy into claymation? "We just love the crafting that goes into the building of objects with our hands," says Gigliotti, "and the childlike anticipation that comes with knowing that you get to add the illusion of life to these objects"
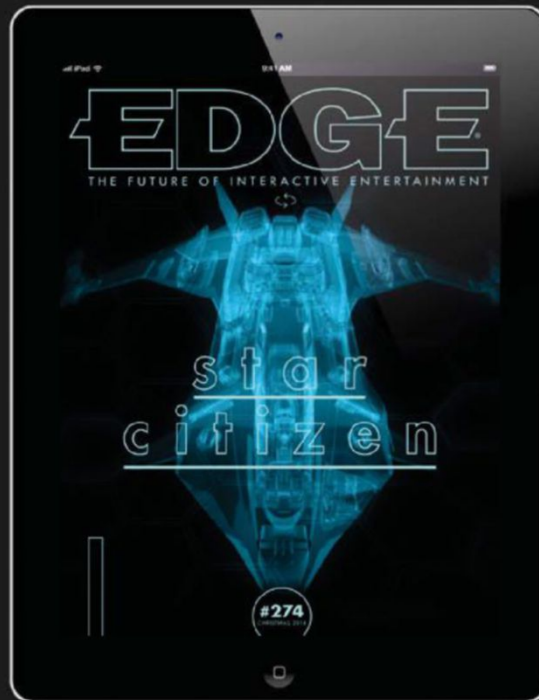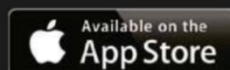
Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"Younger game creators… **want to tell stories that will touch hearts.** And while I understand that desire, the trend worries me. It should be the experience that's touching."

Shigeru Miyamoto prizes gameplay over fuzzy feelings

"There's a silent majority who have an **uneasy relationship with mobile app value…** The general environment has trained people to expect huge amounts of content, or even apps, for free."

Ustwo's **Neil McFarland** on consumers expecting more *Monument Valley* for nothing

"It is going slowly, but, you know, they tried to do the best, newest, greatest thing ever to happen in the driving genre, and they hit a hiccup. I prefer people to have the ambition to try that. **It's no fun being safe all the time.**"

SCEA president **Shawn Layden** applauds *DriveClub*

"[*Assassin's Creed Unity*] presents **an image of hatred** of the Revolution, hatred of the people, hatred of the Republic, which is rampant in the far-right milieu [of today]."

French MEP **Jean-Luc Mélenchon** hits out at Ubisoft's portrayal of his nation's history

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

Game *Project Hades*
Manufacturer Simuline, Specular Interactive

Specular Interactive, the studio behind *H2Overdrive* and *Batman* arcade racing, has teamed up with dynamic ride and simulator maker Simuline to create '4D' lightgun game *Project Hades*. The game uses Simuline's Valkyrie platform, an eight-seat unit that sits on top of the company's 6-Axis hydraulic motion base. Rather than use the 'theatre' arrangement, however, Valkyrie instead places two rows of four players back-to-back, each group furnished with their own 170-inch screen. Along with the motion buffeting, players are also hit with intense wind and strobe effects as well as virtual intrusions into their personal space thanks to stereoscopic 3D. The game, which is the first motion theatre ride to employ Unreal Engine 4, arms players with a haptic-feedback gun and drops them into a colourful, explosive zombie apocalypse. While it can be difficult to distinguish your position from other players' in some large-scale lightgun games, *Project Hades*' brightly coloured reticles make it easier to keep track of the action, and cycle through designs depending on which weapon you're armed with. The game is scheduled for a 2015 release and, like other motion theatre lightgun games, takes place across one level, though it's one densely packed with zombies as well as some larger threats, and features both on-foot and vehicle sections. The two screens also offer differing perspectives on the action, upping the replay value.

My Favourite Game
Christopher Brookmyre

The novelist talks terrible ping rates, the early days of the online FPS, and why weapon caches are always bad news

Christopher Brookmyre is a Scottish novelist whose longstanding passion for gaming has found its way into many of his books. His debut novel, Quite Ugly One Morning, was released in 1996 and was adapted for television in 2004. But last year's Bedlam, a novel in which the protagonist finds himself trapped in a videogame after an experiment goes awry, is going one step further and expanding its story with a bespoke game set in the same universe.

You're helping to make a game that sends its protagonist through the ages of the FPS. Has that always been a genre you've felt close to?
Yeah. I remember playing the original *Duke Nukem* and things like that, and then my first online experience was *Quake* – I had a 14k modem and the ping was over 300. The framerate was terrible! But shortly after that, I took my computer apart for the first time and put in a 3D accelerator card and got a better modem, and I got into *Quake II* at around the same time. I got heavily into *Quake II* and *Quake III* and the online clan scene in the late '90s and early '00s. I played in a *Quake* clan for years. I got caught up in the burgeoning online culture at the time. And it was a culture – I could see that there was slang developing, people were creating their own mods, skins, maps, everything. To me, it was the new punk.

What about more recently?
I'm very monogamous when it comes to my genres! I played *Serious Sam*, *Half-Life*, *Half-Life 2*, *Sin*, *Portal* and *Portal 2*,

GAME CHANGER
Brookmyre is working with UK-based outfit RedBedlam, maker of MMOG *The Missing Ink*, on the adaptation of Bedlam. The game casts you as Heather Quinn, a colleague of the novel's lead character, Ross Baker, who also finds herself trapped in a game. By exploring glitches and exploiting clipping issues, Quinn discovers she can move between different games, but still bring with her the weapons she found elsewhere. The worlds you enter document the evolution of the FPS genre, including some playful digs at its clichés, but touches on other forms, too. At the time of writing, *Bedlam* is available through Steam Early Access, though a full release is due soon.
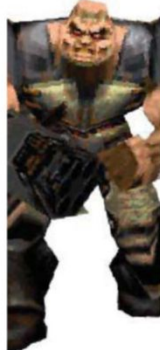
but in recent years the only FPS I've played an awful lot of – apart from *Doom 3* – is *Team Fortress 2*, mainly because my son got me into it. But I'm getting old – I don't have the reflexes any more! I used to play against my son at *Quake III*, and I would give myself a handicap, but now it has to be the other way around if I'm to stand any chance against him. Most recently I've been playing *Alien: Isolation*, and it couldn't be any further from my natural comfort zone!

Growing up as a writer playing games, did the quality of game narrative matter to you?
You know what, it really didn't. It was hugely inspirational. I wrote a book called One Fine Day In The Middle Of The Night, and it was largely inspired by the experience of playing games like *Quake* and *Quake II* for the first time, creeping around having firefights with rocket launchers and machine guns. I wanted to take that excitement and put it into a novel. And in those days, you weren't bothered about the story; it was about immersing yourself in these worlds you could explore.

Has environmental storytelling in games affected how you write novels?
It's been hugely influential. When I wrote Pandemonium, I'd played lots of *Doom 3* and I wanted to bring that same sense of horror and fear married to the era of the video nasties, which I grew up in. So I wanted to write a slasher-movie story,

> "Quake felt like something for those of us who were interested in computers and lifting the bonnet"

and Pandemonium was about a bunch of teenagers away for a retreat weekend after a school tragedy, but unbeknownst to them they're not far away from this top-secret underground military base which has a portal through which demons, or what look like demons, come into our world… And it pays its dues. For example, towards the end the teenagers are down in the secret military base, where everybody's dead, and they come across all these weapons and ammunition, and they're all like, "Oh, great – we can really fight back now!" But the one who's a gamer is like, "No – bad sign. If there's a shitload of guns and ammo, that means there's a major boss that's going to be round the corner."

We're assuming it's an FPS, but what's your favourite game?
I'd have to choose *Quake II*. At the time, it was the state of the art with its new engine. It looked like nothing else, and felt like nothing else. You had dynamic lighting for the first time properly, and 3D acceleration… But mostly the reason it's my favourite is the online culture that grew around it. I just spent *countless* hours online playing team deathmatch, freeze tag or jailbreak – all the mods people dreamed up. It was a very creative community and at the time it felt like something for those of us who were interested in computers and lifting the bonnet to tinker a little underneath. Not much of it would stand up now, but it remains hugely influential. ■

Brookmyre has penned 18
novels, including Country
Of The Blind and Boiling
A Frog, attracting plaudits
from late fellow Scot
Iain Banks in the process

WEBSITE
Tidamz's Unity
tidamz.tumblr.com
Photographer Damien Hypolite has put *Assassin's Creed Unity*'s detailled rendition of Paris to the test by comparing screenshots from the game to the real buildings as they currently stand today. On a tour of the city, Hypolite lines up the images from Ubisoft's game with real-life landmarks such as the Panthéon, Notre Dame and the location where the Bastille once stood, now occupied by L'Opéra Bastille. Though little reinforcement was needed, the images underscore just how accurate Ubisoft's artists' work is, their recreations sometimes almost indistinguishable from reality. Seeing Arno's contemporaries bustling on the streets makes for an intriguing juxtaposition with modern Paris's technology and glamorous shops, too. We just hope Hypolite isn't tempted to scale any of these famous structures himself.

VIDEO
Atari: Game Over
www.bit.ly/xboxatari
Screenwriter and director Zak Penn has been involved in many of the recent rash of superhero movies, but in Atari: Game Over, he steps away from Hollywood blockbusters to document the excavation of Atari's *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* cartridge landfill. While the story is well told, it's the film's other thread – a charting of Atari's rapid ascent and catastrophic demise – that proves most engaging. Offering up testimonies from people who were there at the time, the documentary includes Atari founder Nolan Bushnell, former Warner executive Manny Gerard, and *ET* creator Howard Warshaw.

WEB GAME
MiniDayZ
dayz.com/minidayz
Created by Mike Azovskikh, *MiniDayZ* recasts Bohemia's survival sim into a top-down 2D browser game. It received Bohemia's blessing when *DayZ* creator Dean Hall spotted an early version of the game and put Azovskikh in touch with the studio. Now the current build is available to play via Bohemia's website for free. Each game starts out much like *DayZ*, with the player appearing somewhere on the shore of a large island with nothing but a T-shirt, a pair of trousers and their fists. You'll have to keep an eye on your thirst and hunger levels, as well as your temperature as you scavenge for supplies in zombie-infested towns. It's suitably tough, even on the easiest of the three difficulties, and basic crafting, inventory management and combat have made it in. All told, it's a convincing distillation.

THIS MONTH ON EDGE

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

HEADPHONES
Ear Force Stealth 500p
www.turtlebeach.com
Turtle Beach has significantly updated its PX4 headphones with its new Stealth 500p, a truly wireless headset for PS4. That means there's no longer any need to connect a wire to your DualShock, since chat is now handled by the small USB dongle (a little larger than the PS Gold equivalent, but significantly smaller than the PX4's base unit) that plugs into the front of the PS4 and connects to the Optical port via a short cable. The headset boasts DTS 7.1 surround sound and features vocal feedback on settings you've changed while wearing them, as opposed to the Morse Code-like beeps of previous devices. Chat is clear, but game sound can be too bassy at times, though rarely to the detriment of the soundtrack. Crystal clarity can be attained by spending more, but for £99, the 500p does an excellent job of impersonating more expensive headphones.

continue

Amii-oh!
Even scaled back from the prototypes, a few of these are fine collectibles

Thimbleweed Park
The point-and-click's founding fathers reunite

Get free
Apple relabels the App Store download button from 'free' to 'get'. A shade less misleading

Rumbled
Far Cry 4 FOV moaners exposed as pirates after Ubisoft's patch trick

quit

Amiid'oh!
Only enough space for one game's data per figure? Oh, Nintendo

Late arrival
The infection spreads: no *Bloodborne* till March

Too many Chiefs
Master Chief Collection multiplayer woes mean *Destiny* patches don't seem so bad now, eh?

Trophy hunt
Endangered species become holsters and bags in *FC4*. The guilt

TWEETS
Ultimately, Joy Division keeps me alive.
Hideo Kojima @HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN
Director, Kojima Productions

The Queen should ban consumable IAPs, throw online casinos into the Tower and set a baseline cost for paid apps at five proper British quid.
Jeff Minter @llamasoft_ox
Indie developer

Never stops being weird, how many games conflate "hero" with "person who kills things to get a reward"
Anthony Burch @reverendanthony
Writer, Gearbox

i've been playing TOMODACHI LIFE for 7 months & no one has ever even expressed vague interest in dating my Mii & it's incomprehensibly sad
Brandon Boyer @brandonnn
Founder, Venus Patrol

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Issue 274

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a SteelSeries Wireless H Headset, or an Apex keyboard plus Sensei Wireless Laser mouse

Hyperinflation

Something crystallised for me the other day when reading a piece you wrote about a game that, while praising its attributes in totality, you led with one perceived negative in that "it won't be the biggest sandbox you've ever played". This struck a chord, in that I've been a gamer since my age was in low single digits. Two-and-a-half decades later, I'm experiencing a squeeze between life and gaming.

What I'm observing is the ongoing expansion of game scope, with an almost automatic assumption that bigger is better. I can understand where this comes from — *Final Fantasy VII* was (and still is) one of the best games I've ever played, four discs of pure immersive game universe at a time when a lot of games were still transitioning from the constraints of cartridges. That was great when I had time to max out the game's internal clock. Now, as a suit working in professional services, I might, note *might*, finish at 6:30 or 7, get home 45 minutes later, go to the gym (optional, I know), cook some dinner, catch up with people, and sort myself out for the next day. That leaves me with one hour for 'personal' things, if I'm lucky, before I go to bed and start again. What does an hour buy you in an open procedurally generated world? Not a lot!

This is why I'm worried, particularly with the new gen, that games are going to continually strive to be bigger. *No Man's Sky* has five billion years of planet exploring. *Star Citizen* has 125 star systems. I don't want that. I want 20—25 hours' play (or, to put it another way, a month to two-and-a-half months' play, depending on how much time I have) with structure and good progression. About two years ago, I made the mistake of starting *Dragon Age*. It was a great game and I really enjoyed it, but it took me the guts of six or seven months

> "I've shelved Unity for now, hoping it will one day become the game it sounded like in previews"

to complete, and by the end I was sprinting past everything with a laser focus on my map marker to get through the quests and complete the story. Not conducive to work/life balance. Conversely, *The Last Of Us* is the best game I've played in years, in part due to its structure. I could play for 45 minutes or an hour and a bit and (not racing) complete three sections, feeling like I'd enjoyed and accomplished something. It was a perfect game for workers.

So this is where I conclude. I hope that developers, publishers, and the surrounding industry don't start focusing just on those that have bags of expendable time. What about us who are growing into lives that have constraints? We don't want to be pushed out by the very games that we want to play! I want to see a new tagline on some games: "This is for the workers".
Richard Franck

The makers of *No Man's Sky* and *Star Citizen* don't intend you to see everything, though: you can dip in or go as deep as you like. That seems better than a thousand tiny distractions, doesn't it? If you can make the time in your schedule, tell us which piece(s) of SteelSeries gear you'd like.

Pension plan

Well I never, we are already at the first anniversary of the latest round of consoles. I'm obviously getting old, because this moment has prompted me to enter a period of reflection, though it could also be a natural defensive response to all the output from the marketing machines of Sony and Microsoft to promote the occasion.

I was seven when I played my first videogame — tennis on a very rudimentary "television game console". Since then, I have successfully overcome the classic obstacles that confront an ageing gamer: family drains on time and finances, work

drains on time, and peer pressure of the "Aren't you too old for that now?" variety.

With the Christmas release period in full swing, I should be happy. However, in this period of reflection, I do wonder if this will be the last generation I actively participate in, since the large players in the industry seem to be doing all they can to alienate me.

It started with the price drop so soon after launch for Xbox One, with little by way of apology or compensation for us day-one buyers. Since then, it seems to be one problem after another, none of which improve the experience of the player. New game after new game requires a large patch at launch. The era of helping players to buy (pre-launch reviews, free demos) appears almost over. Fourplayer, single-system multiplayer appears all but dead. The UIs of both Xbox One and PS4 remain ropey, and the need for countless logins and passwords is ever-growing.

Thankfully, there is hope, and it comes in a form that I would never have dreamt of a few years ago – thank you, iOS. *Year Walk*, *Bastion*, *Drop7*, and *Ridiculous Fishing* offer stupendous entertainment. Even games like *Jetpack Joyride* and *Rayman Jungle Run* are great fun, and help to recreate the magic of videogaming from years ago.

So where does this leave me and, if it isn't too big-headed to say, many other gamers from the first generation of home gaming? Well, times change, technology evolves, and taste and trends move on. I will move with them as far as I can, but I suspect from now on I will enjoy midnight console launches from the warmth of my home, downloading from the App Store instead. Happy anniversary, new consoles, but I'll give the party a miss.
Ian Carlson

Well, *Bastion* started out on Xbox 360, if we're being picky, but you're right that iOS is home to a galaxy of delights. A shame they're often lost in a sea of hidden-object games and cynical me-too freemium tosh.

Compliance failure

Regarding Phil Tully's letter in **E**274, what does the certification process of publishers actually mean any more? I'm not as upset about online play – I prefer to play on my own late in the evenings when the family's tucked up in bed, and the last thing I want at that time of night is someone else's snotty teenager screaming at me – but his point about more and more games being released in a broken state rings true. I understand that no testing process is perfect, but I am at a loss as to how *Assassin's Creed Unity* can be considered a finished product when the framerate nosedives every few minutes, even after the massive day-one patch.

Platform-holder certification is even less clear, because it's no shield against buggy products, and actually seems more like a tax. Indies often fall foul of these obtuse standards, with their games pushed back from their release slots at random, like someone spins a roulette wheel with every project that cost under $5million to make. Yet day-one patches for blockbuster releases are never delayed, even though it can mean downloading 2GB of data that still doesn't fix basic issues with the game.

I've shelved *Unity* for now, and have gone back to *Black Flag*, hoping the newer game will one day become the game it sounded like in previews. But quality control has been the biggest failing of this new generation so far, and it needs looking at.
Andrew Wilson

Boom and bust

I remember it clearly. It was 1992, and the clock read 6am. It was also Christmas morning. My parents were still asleep, but I could not keep my eyes shut one more minute. For months I had cajoled and put in my time of being especially good, all in the hopes of scoring a rare prize: a Sega Mega Drive with *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*. I was desperate. That month, the local video store, with its racks of VHS cassettes, had also begun renting game cartridges. I had almost exploded with anticipation. Now the time was almost here, and I couldn't wait any longer. I had to be sure. I crept downstairs and cradled the large box in Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles paper. Steadily, I slipped a finger under the Sellotape at one end of the box and gently peeled it away. A quick end unfold later and a shimmering black box with a white grid upon it greeted my eyes. "Mega Drive," the side read. "The ultimate computer game console." I resealed the box and returned to sit with a giddying mix of impatience and relief on my bed. But that sneak peek didn't diminish the joy of that Christmas morning, or my first hours with Chemical Plant Zone one bit.

Such was the power of Sega's mascot once, but these days it's hard to feel like the company cares at all about Sonic. Like many fans in an abusive relationship with the once-great hedgehog, I still dared to hope, but I am saddened by the news that *Sonic Boom* is abysmal, the kind of game you give at Christmas to a child who has been bad. Relentless milking has drained the franchise of energy and creativity, while marketing-led initiatives – cast inflation (Cream The Rabbit, seriously?), that iOS money grab, the charmless reinvention of Knuckles as a bruiser – have diluted the colour, speed and focus of *Sonic* to the point that the series is unrecognisable to what I unwrapped in '92. Now it's a byword for crappy design, not a poster boy for "ultimate" gaming.

Mario is no less ubiquitous, but he is topped up by gems such as *3D World* and the *Galaxy* series. Sega can never extinguish the joy I remember, but if it isn't to kill off Sonic for good, it needs to sit up and pay attention to the rival it once left eating its dust. I can only take so much heartbreak.
Richard Todd

Yes, and games didn't need patching, the trains ran on time, Mars bars were bigger, and your knees didn't go all funny in the cold weather. When did we all get so old? ■

STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Saying that modern warfare is like a videogame has become cliché. Laser-assisted rifles, 'smart' bombs, American pilots in Arizona bunkers using joysticks to control flying killer robots over AfPak — that kind of thing. But then what is the player of *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare* supposed to think when, at one stage of the game, she realises she's basically playing *Frogger*? Trying to cross a busy dual carriageway (and shoot men in the middle of it) without being flattened by a series of suspiciously identical bulletproof buses, the player might run up the side of the road a bit, trying to find a pedestrian bridge, but then her vision goes all fuzzy and a command to stay in the 'mission area' is projected directly onto her retinas. So, a murderous jaywalk it must be.

If war is like a videogame, this is a videogame that is like a war that really is a videogame. The war of the future, predicts *Advanced Warfare*, will be a postmodern compilation of historic game mechanics. Not just your standardised funfair shooting gallery (now just the background noise to any such game), but also *Frogger*, *Jetpac* (for future soldiers' boost-jump capability) and *Max Payne* (for their slow-motion ability), not to mention a sardonic dose of *Heavy Rain*. I mean, surely the early moment in *Advanced Warfare* at a military funeral when the player is standing in front of a coffin and is urged to "Press Square to pay your respects" is too brilliant not to be a devastating satire of the whole QTE tradition, the still-yawning chasm between the act of depressing a plastic button and the emo-narrative ambitions of the 'cinematic' blockbuster console product.

If the war of the future is going to be a videogame — and this must be true, since the designers of *Advanced Warfare* couldn't shut up about how many military experts they had consulted during its making — what about the war of the past? Like you, I learn most of what I know about the wars of the past from movies starring Brad Pitt. Recently I brushed

The war of the future is going to consist of vast swarms of miniature armed drones the size of infant bumblebees

up on my knowledge of WWII by watching *Fury* — or, to give it the title it should have had, Brad Pitt In A Tank. It turns out Brad Pitt's war might have gone better for him if he had played a few videogames. (Spoilers follow until the end of this paragraph.) At the climax of the film, Brad Pitt has decided, for no very good reason, to fight a large company of Nazis using only his tank and the crewmates thereof. When the tank's main ammo runs out, Brad Pitt climbs up out of his hatch to man the .50-calibre machine gun mounted atop the vehicle. Improbably to any FPS aficionado, no Nazi soldier thinks of

trying to get around to the rear of the tank to shoot Brad Pitt in the back. But at length, he does get taken down by a glinty-eyed Nazi sniper in a ghillie suit. Poor Brad Pitt: any videogame player could have told him that you should never spend too long on a turret.

Revealingly, the most thrilling shots in Brad Pitt In A Tank show a top-down view of a tank battle, as the lumbering machines circle on their tracks, swivelling their turrets to try to target each other in a kind of frantic slowness. In other words, the film's aesthetic peak most resembles a hi-res update of a 1970s Atari 2600 tank game, *Combat*. Is it just a psychological truth about a generation who grew up playing videogames that they cannot see such a thing without being reminded of an old console classic? Perhaps, but in this case the reference was very possibly deliberate on the director's part: after all, a flat, planar, essentially two-dimensional viewpoint is something that most people automatically associate with videogames even if they have never been in the habit of playing them.

Of course, what the war of the future is really going to be like has not yet been portrayed in any visual medium. The makers of *Advanced Warfare* are probably at least right to think that Kevin Spacey will wear a weirdly realistic but slightly too stiff rubber mask of his own face in the future. But otherwise they are wrong: the war of the future is going to consist of vast swarms of miniature armed drones the size of infant bumblebees. In this future, there is no room for human soldiers or clumsy tank-like machinery on the battlefield. It will just look like a weaponised version of the Biblical swarm of locust: a cloud that eats everything it passes over. That's not very telegenic or ludogenic. In which case, Activision and its ilk might have to come up with some new ideas for electronic entertainment. So the future, after all, might not be totally bad.

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

IAN BOGOST

Difficulty Switch

Hard game criticism

We like to fool ourselves that our games are realistic, but really they are far from it. Physics in particular has long been a part of games, and the simulation of the physical world, either in abstraction for entertainment or with accuracy for scientific or training purposes, remains a cornerstone of creating and operating them. Modern game engines all provide some version of physical simulation, but physics means something quite particular in the context of games.

Often, physics is a special effect, as in the case of particle systems. This graphics technique uses a large number of small visual elements in order to simulate the appearance of a larger phenomenon, such as fire, smoke, clouds, fog, dust and so forth. Given modern 3D games' penchant for both dark, brooding environments and fiery explosions, this kind of physical simulation is far more relevant in a game than it might be in a more ordinary scenario, such as an operating room.

Unlike particle systems, rigid- and soft-body physics applies to almost everything we encounter in the ordinary world: your feet against a football; your tyres in contact with the pavement; a scalpel severing the flesh of a patient on the operating table; a dish plunging into the soapy water in a kitchen sink. In our ordinary lives, these dynamics are nested and complex, such that intuition and experience make it difficult to fully characterise all the factors at play in a particular physical experience.

Even with far greater processing power than is currently available, games couldn't possibly hope to recreate the entire world at the most granular physical level in real time. And so they abstract. A vehicle's weight and force and lift stand in for its overall performance. A ball or projectile's trajectory is dampened by an abstraction of its in-flight alterations thanks to wind or its drag once it is deposited on grass or snow. The result is that distinctive feeling of 'game physics' we have come to know so well. It helps us

We are always flopping our way toward victory in games, even those that reject the stupidity of such floundering

distinguish one vehicle from another in *Watch Dogs*. It offers something resembling the physical sensation of walking waist-deep in water or sludge in *The Last Of Us*. And, of course, it affords the pleasure and confusion of the physical collision, interaction and destruction of objects in the likes of *Half-Life* or *Unreal*. Here, physics becomes realistic enough that it induces awe.

Then a game like *Surgeon Simulator* steps in to throw things asunder — literally. For the same physical assumptions that make it possible to explode walls and knock crates off ledges also make the ordinary, everyday

experience of the physical world in games preposterous and absurd. In most games, the small-scale objects that fill desks and cabinets are locked in place, accessed by a button press or else represented as textured objects that resist interaction. But these are the sorts of tools that a surgeon — that greatest of precision workers — must contend with at the level of intricate action.

Surgeon Simulator juxtaposes the conventions of videogame rigid- and soft-body physics with the reality of surgical precision at the level of individual digits accessing and manipulating tools and tissues. In the PC version of the game, the mouse controls the virtual surgeon's hand. Holding the right button allows the player to rotate the hand at the wrist, and keyboard presses provide the ability to open or close the joints of digits for grasping and manipulation.

The result is a comical send-up of the idea of game physics. Instruments and canisters (and, occasionally, entire organs) go flying about, dutifully obeying the rigid-body physics simulation so common as to be deeply integrated into modern engines. The difficulty of controlling the surgeon becomes the point of the game rather than its failure. *Surgeon Simulator* is a game about the ludicrousness of all physical interactions in all modern videogames. After all, every game makes more or less the same assumptions about the level of abstraction necessary to represent the physical world. Those become ideology, and we cease to think about them, even as we often have the (correct) sense that physical objects and substances are being caricatured for our benefit.

It should make us realise a greater truth: we are always flopping our way toward victory in games, even those that reject the intrinsic humour and stupidity of such floundering in favour of dark, gritty underworlds in which square-jawed men fire projectiles at walls just to see them crumble.

Ian Bogost is an author and game designer. His award-winning A Slow Year *is available at www.bit.ly/1eQalad*

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NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

When I read that Wilson Phillips' Hold On was one of the 160-odd songs Rockstar had added to the radio soundtrack for *GTAV*'s remastered release, I punched the air, then immediately went and preordered the digital version. I have loved that record and wanted it on a *GTA* soundtrack for years, but have only recently been able to admit it. It has long been a quiet, guilty pleasure, but the older I get, the less relevant the first word in that phrase becomes, and the louder I get in my Batemanesque pub-table proclamations of its brilliance. It set me wondering about why we don't really see the same thing in games (no one wakes up on their 30th birthday and finds themselves finally prepared to admit to loving *Superman 64*, you know?), and I thought this month's column was sorted.

Then the enormous *GTAV* download finally finished, the grindingly ponderous install completed, I drove Franklin around Los Santos with the radio tuned to Non Stop Pop, and it slowly became miserably clear that Hold On wasn't on the soundtrack after all. I checked online and read news stories about the new soundtrack but found no mention of it, eventually clarifying the situation via a forum post. It seems the confusion stemmed from the song being found in data files mined from the 360 version's disc, where it was one of a number of tracks named but not included, and so had been assumed to be making an appearance in the remaster. But it hadn't. I'd paid £55 for a game on the unconfirmed promise of a single song, and that promise had turned out to be a false one. I was gutted.

That was no fault of Rockstar's, of course. More fool me for taking Internet speculation as gospel, I guess — a lesson I should have learned long ago — but it's far from the first time I've been persuaded to put money down for a game on the promise of something that turned out to not exist. After all, the grand, impossible promise is one of the foundations on which this industry is built.

<div style="writing-mode: vertical">Illustration marshdavies.com</div>

We want developers to reach for the skies until the precise moment it becomes apparent that they can't quite get there

I can understand why, to an extent — reality got in the way of my original plan for this column, after all. Design documents are essentially wishlists, roadmaps for initial visions that have to be redrawn and scaled back as projects progress. A studio might not have the time, money or manpower to complete a planned feature; perhaps it did get made, but didn't work as intended, and thus was scrapped. But when a developer first starts speaking in public about a new game, they're often still talking about the theory rather than the reality, the vision rather than the execution. At this point,

they've got big ideas and they want to stand out. Little wonder so many of them shout their grand plans from the rooftops.

It's something that Early Access should have fixed, really. By pulling back the curtain, opening a constant line of dialogue between developer and player, and offering playable builds from early in development, there should be far less opportunity for pulling the wool over the potential customer's eyes. Yet if anything, the opposite has happened, prompting Valve to update Steam's Early Access developer terms with some new rules. Two jumped out at me: "Make sure you set expectations properly everywhere you talk about your game," and "Do not make specific promises about future events."

This is fair enough — and prompted by a few too many cases where developers have essentially taken the Early Access money and run — but what was intended to give small studios an alternative route to market that bypassed the traditional publishing model has ended up insisting that they also opt out of the traditional marketing one.

No one likes a broken promise, but what worries me about this most is the knock-on effect it might have on those grand design documents. Promises are a reflection of ambition; we want developers to reach for the skies until the precise moment it becomes apparent that they can't quite get there, at which point we just want them to get as close to it as possible. Not every game should copy *Black & White* — and God knows (and *Godus* shows) that one Peter Molyneux is plenty — but creators should be dreamers first and realists later. If a developer's vision is bound to what he or she knows is realistically achievable, games are only going to get less interesting. Early Access was meant to empower creators, not restrict them. Steam is a platform full of problems, of course, but I worry that Valve itself just created the biggest one of all.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s deputy editor, and would like to apologise to fellow pub patrons for the Hold On singalong*

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H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Hype content

Move your body

Ask any DJ what truly defines their craft and most will explain that technical ability and the quality of the contents of your record bag mean little if you're not playing the songs in the right order. The art, and the purpose, of playing loud music to a big room lies in keeping people moving to it for an entire night. Sure, it's about the tunes, but also, crucially, it's about the journey.

That's something FPS developers seem to be cottoning onto. In this most competitive of genres, there's only so much you can do with the act of aiming and shooting. The FPS is ultimately a game of pulling a trigger until something falls over, and nothing is going to change that.

What can change, however, is the journey. As we close out the year that gave us *Titanfall*'s wall-run, *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare*'s boost-dodge and *Destiny*'s glide, we find that developers seem set to continue experimenting in the future with the things the player can do when the shooting stops. In *Halo 5: Guardians*, 343 Industries is bravely expanding a 13-year-old moveset with unlimited sprinting, a double jump and a devastating ground pound. On p36, we discover how the studio is balancing its additions to avoid upsetting fans, but the very fact that such radical change is deemed necessary says a lot for where the genre is heading.

Blizzard Entertainment, meanwhile, continues its history of ploughing its own furrow, though it's once again telling that it enters the FPS space with a game defined as much by its movement as its weaponset. In *Overwatch* (p40), jump packs, grappling hooks and teleports help differentiate classes in far more meaningful ways than the traditional big-and-slow/light-and-squishy template. It's an idea borrowed from the MOBA, admittedly, but there's no harm in a little gentle pilfering. After all, DJs make their names and their money playing other people's records. It's only fair that we extend the same courtesy to developers seeking to push things forward.

HALO 5: GUARDIANS

Halo embraces the double jump,
but keeps its feet on the ground

Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	In-house (343 Industries)
Format	Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	2015

Halo 5's campaign is partly the tale of Jameson Locke, 'legendary manhunter' and quasi-secret policeman – an intriguing break from John-117's spotless heroism

Plenty has changed for FPS multiplayer in 2014, the ancient grudge match between pistol, rifle, shotgun and sniper rifle augmented by taller, more tiered arenas, new methods of traversal, and an array of special powers. Even the pantheon of videogame guns has admitted new members and attachments, the likes of *Titanfall* strapping the Triple Threat and Arc Cannon to its titular mechs, and *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare* upgrading sights and grenades to tag enemies in lurid red. *Halo 5: Guardians*, meanwhile, elides the series' time-worn arsenal with a suite of fluid locomotion tricks, while simultaneously also reverting the missteps of *Halo 4*'s multiplayer.

There is much that's familiar, then, but there's much still to draw from a template that once defined the peak of the multiplayer console shooter. The infamous pistol, for instance, remains a joy to use. Wrapped in a vastly more elaborate model, it's as murderous as ever against unshielded targets, a useful tool to finish opponents whether you switch to it after emptying a rifle into a player's shield during a close-up scrap or take an opportunistic potshot across a map.

The Assault Rifle is once again a smart warm-up option, wearing the target down as you hop over return fire, but no match at mid-range for the Battle Rifle's three-round bursts — best aimed at an opponent's torso, so that

the recoil jolts the final shot up to the head. And frag grenades are still comically oversized rubber pineapples that will strip away a shield if you can gauge the physics just right and second-guess your victim's evasive patterns.

The rhythms these weapons create are buttressed by a familiar selection of modes and metagame elements, some of which even predate Xbox 360. What's more, 343 has retreated from *Halo 4*'s flirtations with unlockable abilities and perks. Progression is now entirely cosmetic, with prematch tactical customisation in the modes we've sampled limited to a choice of generic loadouts. More exotic weapons and power-ups such as Active Camo and the Overshield are found on the map, though drop-off points are highlighted by introductory cinematics and players are notified 30 seconds in advance of spawns.

As likely to please longterm fans is the confirmation that hipfire carries no penalty in *Halo 5* and that descoping is back. It's doubly relevant now that all weapons support a Smart Scope mode, which generated much consternation when gameplay footage was leaked, though it's little more than a glorified visor zoom that doesn't affect your mobility, unlike aiming down sights in *COD*. As such, old habits soon reassert themselves during rounds of Slayer on Truth, a reworking of ▶

Tim Longo, creative director, 343 Industries

Spartan suits resemble American football armour, and *Halo 5* leans on the parallel in Breakout, where soldiers launch onto the map in a line like teams leaving a dugout

The ground pound's sheer showiness may annoy traditionalists, but it's both challenging to use – you're vulnerable while aiming its reticle and immediately after impact – and satisfying

Halo 2's Midship, players circling the central platforms with one eye glued on the minimap and ears pricked for the glutinous smack of a plasma grenade finding its mark.

If the gunplay hews close to old patterns, then, the same cannot be said for the Spartans' expanded moveset, though the playing field is level for all. One of this series' strengths has always been the thrill of escaping a firefight, manoeuvring behind cover by instinct until the frantic distress calls of a punctured shield elapse, and *Halo 5* unfolds at an even more frantic pace than usual thanks to 343's introduction of so-called Spartan Abilities, which provoke immediate comparison with *Advanced Warfare*.

The least intriguing but most significant is unlimited sprinting, which 343 co-founder Frank O'Connor insists isn't the get-out-of-jail-free card it is in other shooters: while sprinting, your shield doesn't recharge, so

"The abilities add flavour; they add layers to the experience, but they're not required"

headlong flight is only worthwhile if it takes you somewhere safe. Sprinting also fills a power bar that can be converted into a slide move or a charging melee strike, the latter of which kills instantly if delivered from behind.

There's an intentional double jump that, in concert with the ability to grab ledges, makes it easier to move to a map's upper levels at pace, and you can also hover in midair by squeezing the left trigger, while jet dodges allow for snappy manoeuvring during duels. Most controversially of all, you can hold crouch while jumping to line up a ground pound, which is deadly to anything directly beneath it and inflicts modest splash damage. It encapsulates the tweaks at *Halo 5*'s heart, being a means of quick traversal that doubles as a devastating offensive move, but it's by no means unstoppable — miss and the fuss of your arrival should ensure swift retribution.

The studio is conscious that such tweaks may horrify returning fans, and is quick to assert that the new abilities merely build on what already works for the franchise. "The

goal was to integrate the mobility into the map design, so you have a lot more control and freedom," says creative director **Tim Longo**, a recent Microsoft Studios hire and veteran of *Star Wars: Republic Commando*. "And then the offensive abilities, like Spartan charge and ground pound, are for fantasy fulfilment as well as being good finishers."

The designers have been careful not to overwrite *Halo*'s feel, Longo says. "We had various ideas early in development, and the ones that made it were those that gelled with the [established mechanics]. We didn't want to inundate players with too many things, but rather give them depth. So you say, 'Oh, I'll try this one this time, and maybe in the next game I'll do it more.'"

Studio head **Josh Holmes** is equally quick to assuage fears: "The abilities add flavour; they add layers to the experience, but they're not required, so you can start playing the game as you've always played *Halo*."

It will be many months before such claims can be verified, but our close-fought battles on the beta's three launch-day maps do hit plenty of familiar notes. None of the abilities seem to dominate: to counter the risk of aerial ambushes, say, there's a short wind-up on the ground pound that leaves you vulnerable for a crucial second, plus a dynamic chatter system to alert you to the threats around you. Both prove invaluable on Empire, a new rooftop map that overlooks a raging urban insurrection, and whose ramps, pipes and platforms create plenty of opportunities for dive-bombing Spartans. The comparatively level Crossfire pays the new moves less mind, and old-fashioned close-quarters battles soon erupt inside the fortresses to either flank.

If the Spartan Abilities feel unobtrusive at this stage, however, that could reflect the beta's focus on four-on-four duelling, and that *Halo* has always been an agile shooter. More heavily populated spats may be more chaotic, and 343 has plenty to prove on this count: as accomplished as *Halo 4*'s on-foot gunplay was, it couldn't touch Bungie's work for larger-scale battles and vehicular warfare. Still, there's lots of time to introduce and perfect such modes before *Halo 5*'s expected release window of autumn 2015. ■

The Smart Scope mode on the left trigger isn't quite the same as aiming down sights, but there's the same penalty to peripheral vision

How sporting
Microsoft is pushing eSports in a big way with *Halo*: Xbox Live's Halo Channel serves, among other things, as a platform for Twitch streams and stat tracking. It also wants eSports to be friendlier, an agenda reflected in *Halo 5*'s multiplayer interface. Competitive Skill Ratings are now visible on the front-end, and the top two of the game's seven ranking tiers are Pro and Semi-pro, the idea being that "you don't have to be a pro to feel like a pro", according to creative director Tim Longo. A less cosmetic touch is the addition of a Spectator mode for every multiplayer match, so that new players can learn from watching the best.

TOP **The absence of ability and loadout progression is friendlier to newcomers, and also means pros can think more about what happens on the map than off it.**
MAIN **The remastering of** *Halo 2*'s **Midship to serve as the beta's showpiece map is plainly designed to reassure those who might be put off by the revamped ability set**

TOP **Empire is set right in the midst of a human insurrection. It's a warren of blind corners and open second-floor spaces, with a sniper-rifle spawnpoint on a balcony at one end.**
RIGHT **Thus far, the modes are a mixture of variations on objective capture and team deathmatch, with the promise of bigger team shootouts down the line**

OVERWATCH

Blizzard enters a brand-new universe with all guns blazing

Publisher | Blizzard Entertainment
Developer | In-house
Format | PC
Origin | US
Release | TBC (beta in 2015)

Symmetra is a light-bending support hero, her turrets slowing enemies as she shields her allies from harm

Everything Blizzard has released since *StarCraft* all those years ago has been spun off from the 1998 game, 1994's *Warcraft* or 1996's *Diablo*. Sometimes series have jumped genres, notably with *World Of Warcraft* and the more recent offshoot, *Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft*, but the new universe of *Overwatch* feels fresh, even if it sees Blizzard aiming to do what it does best: take the familiar and polish it until it glimmers. In this case, it's the team-based shooter, with a clean, bright look and an emphasis on welcoming action that resembles one game in particular.

"When I hear *Team Fortress 2* comparisons, nothing could be more flattering. *TF2* is one of my all-time favourite games," **Jeff Kaplan**, *Overwatch*'s director, tells us. "I think, though, that as we saw at BlizzCon, people who play the game realise that while there's inspiration from there, it's very different. It's about abilities, the mobility factor, there's elements like the tank characters with their shields, and the team dynamics… It's really its own game."

That game is a six-a-side shooter set in a near future where once-retired heroes are returning to continue the fight for the world, the cast ranging from offensive specialists such as the skull-mask-wearing Reaper and cruel sniper Widowmaker to rather more unusual combatants such as Winston, a

gorilla from the Moon armed with a Tesla cannon. In the first of many deviations from shooter convention, the heroes are built along the lines of MOBA characters, with abilities, rather than guns, defining their playstyle. Thus, Winston has a jump pack for getting around, while Widowmaker gets a grappling hook and Reaper has a mark-and-recall teleport for yanking himself out of battle.

Overwatch isn't a MOBA, though, Kaplan explains. "In *Overwatch*, you can switch hero with every death. Multiple people on the team can be the same hero. Also, the key feature of MOBAs for me is a progression and PvE element, with things like minions and towers, and we're not focused on any of that." Instead, *Overwatch* is intended to push the sense of character and heroics, Kaplan referring to Blizzard's approach as an attempt to be the 'hero factory', in that it's not simply providing characters, but inspiring players to be heroic.

It's also intended to appeal to everyone, rather than targeting hardcore shooter fans. The aesthetic is part of that, but the ethos runs deeper. The true genius of *Team Fortress 2* is that even now, years after release, its audience primarily treats it as a place to have fun, rather than having shrunk into an insular shell. And Kaplan is taking pains to avoid MOBA-like hostility bleeding in here. ▶

Jeff Kaplan, director

Tracer is *Overwatch*'s icon character, a cheerful English adventurer who can blink around maps and jump a few seconds back in time at will
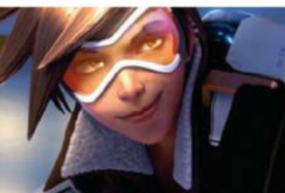
Blizzard has taken flak for its female characters of late, and wants to fix that by being as inclusive as possible in *Overwatch*

"One of the goals of *Overwatch* is to create a community where players feel safe and where the game itself is very approachable," he says. "Something we learned as a team while making raid encounters for *World Of Warcraft* in the early days is that the more you place players in a dire situation and ratchet up the importance of individual contributions and the pressure, the more players would turn on each other and make the game unpleasant."

The catch is that without any pressure, something equally important is lost, and so Blizzard's 6v6 format is a very specific choice. "We explored really big teams early on: the 8v8, the 10v10," Kaplan says. "When we hit those team sizes, though, everyone got lost. The game was just chaos — a deathmatch, rather than a team objective game. As we tried teams of 4v4 and 3v3, that sense of hostility that I mentioned started appearing."

Not being locked into specific characters for the whole match is intended to help too, though specific abilities will have their ideal counters. But there will be flexibility: a turret could be taken out with a rocket from outside its range, you can use ricochet shots to hit it from safety, or you could blink in and place a bomb and then get out again. Map traversal is a huge part of this, with *Overwatch* harking back to the freedom of early *Quake* mods full of jetpacks. "Now, when you're approaching part of a map, you're looking at every part of it and looking at combinations. We wanted to give players a lot of agency and choice, and a lot of really fun decisions. Plus, it's cool!"

All of that said, Kaplan points out that six on a team is no magic bullet. "It's not [a number] I think you could just plug into *Heroes Of The Storm* or *StarCraft* or another game, but it was right for *Overwatch*. The way we've got it is that if you are a real disaster for your team, or having a real off day, or the doorbell rings, or the cat walks in front of the screen, your team isn't going to lose because of you. If you are a really great player, though, you can still excel and maybe even swing a mediocre team to greatness."

Along with being Blizzard's first step into the FPS, *Overwatch* is also its first game set on a recognisable Earth — even *Rock N'Roll Racing*, from when Blizzard was Silicon & Synapse,

was set on other planets. "The choice to be on Earth in the near future was one that didn't come easily to the team," Kaplan admits, adding that there was brief discussion of doing something else, like a *StarCraft* shooter, or perhaps even bringing existing characters together for an FPS, as *Heroes Of The Storm* is doing for Blizzard's in-house take on *Dota*.

"We started to explore the options with our existing franchises, but we didn't want to get into those spaces again. Add to that, we thought we could do something different with Earth — that instead of just doing the usual postapocalyptic stuff, we could apply our own aesthetic, tone and vibe. We'd ask ourselves, what would Blizzard do with London, with Egypt, with Japan? We've explored fantasy worlds, and we're now excited to explore our own."

Blizzard hasn't yet announced which business model *Overwatch* will use, though

"We wanted to give players a lot of agency and choice, and a lot of really fun decisions"

given that it's in a genre in which F2P has been proven to work, and both *Hearthstone* and *Heroes Of The Storm* have embraced the model, *Overwatch* might follow. So far, 12 heroes have been announced, but more are coming, along with expansions to the universe both in and out of the game. Movies such as the reveal trailer are designed to build the world without putting narrative restrictions on play. For that, Blizzard's approach — in the words of Chris Metzen — is a shrug of "What the hell?" If players want to field two mortal enemies on a team or have multiple Tesla-wielding apes, that freedom takes priority.

Certainly, early impressions are positive, especially with the results already being playable and a beta due next year, as opposed to several down the line. It's likely to be a long beta, however, with Blizzard well aware of the challenges ahead. "We know how important it is to our fans that we do it right, and how high the expectations are," Kaplan says. "We really want to make this game with the community and hear what they have to say." ∎

Remember Titan

Overwatch has been claimed to be the PvP element of Blizzard's aborted *Project Titan*, an MMOG that was in development for years and subject to at least one major reboot before its cancellation. There are some similarities, including a near-future Earth setting and even maps being carried over to the new game, yet Kaplan says that calling *Overwatch* a sliced-up glimpse of what could have been is radically overstating the matter. "*Overwatch* is completely its own game. There were some design ideas and concept art that we explored and brought across from *Project Titan*, but there was so much just not working on it that there wasn't much we could carry over."

TOP LEFT **Wilson the space gorilla is easily the most popular *Overwatch* hero so far. Fortunately, you can have more than one on a team.** TOP RIGHT **Widowmaker has a strong resemblance to *StarCraft*'s Nova, except evil, with a grappling hook, and showing a little more skin.** MAIN **Reaper is not a support hero – his ultimate attack is spinning, shotguns splayed, in what he apparently likes to call his 'Death Blossom'**

FAR LEFT **Most characters have a traversal power, with maps being built to allow full use of them, rather than funnelling everyone down endless sci-fi corridors.** LEFT **Mercy's wings are intended for zooming to fallen allies, and to let her descend safely from on high**

SKYSAGA: INFINITE ISLES

Led by Blitz Studios veterans, Radiant Worlds sets out to stripmine the skies

Publisher	Smilegate
Developer	Radiant Worlds
Format	PC
Origin	UK
Release	TBA

SkySaga: Infinite Isles sees Radiant Worlds constructing not just a deceptively familiar free-to-play take on *Minecraft*, but a metaphor for its own transcendence of Blitz Games Studios, the 23-year-old UK independent that closed its doors in September 2013 and gave the studio birth. A clear debt to Mojang's rampant success aside, the game's sunny archipelago of voxel-based islands is a fine opening beat for a team that's making a fresh start. Its focus on procedural generation and item crafting, meanwhile, chimes with talk of a freer, more exploratory development culture than was practical under Blitz's regimen of externally owned IPs.

Speaking to us during a tour of Radiant's offices, located within spitting distance of its predecessor's HQ in Leamington Spa, old hands enthuse about the change of direction — among them Andrew and **Philip Oliver**, the twins who created Dizzy The Egg in the '80s. "All the brands we've worked with, across all those games, it was typically about one year per project on average," says Philip. "Well, you've seen what we've done in one year, but [with *SkySaga*] we'll keep on going."

Design director **Benjamin Fisher** is also relieved by the shift away from the short cycles on work-for-hire projects. "At Blitz, you'd be working on a SpongeBob game for six months, from a blank page to the finished game," he says. "It was just: 'Get it done; make sure it's on brand.' Here, we're spending time and effort to grow a collaborative culture. I send round an email every week or two, and I just harvest everybody's suggestions."

The team is reluctant to say too much about Blitz, though dark allusions are dropped regarding the fallout from events at various publishers (it's suggested THQ's bankruptcy was the fatal blow), and Radiant Worlds is also determined to avoid discussing *Minecraft* too explicitly. But the story is more complex than Blitz's ailments or Mojang loans anyway. *SkySaga* predates its present developer — Philip Oliver drew up the concept in 2011, and development began in summer 2013 with Korean publisher Smilegate's input. And while it's hard to imagine Blitz working on a game such as this, given its fondness for licensed fare, *SkySaga* builds on its 23-year portfolio in ways the cuboid vistas don't quite express.

It's a question, partly, of the character design, which sees opulent hunks of face, fist and boot joined together by invisible string and able to be outfitted with thousands of different pieces of user-made clothing and armour. Chiselled and lustrous, they're the product of an art team that has spent time around cartoon merchandise. Mostly, though, it's a question of time. Where *Minecraft* is ▶

Philip and Andrew Oliver, creators of Dizzy. Philip came up with the concept for *SkySaga* back in 2011
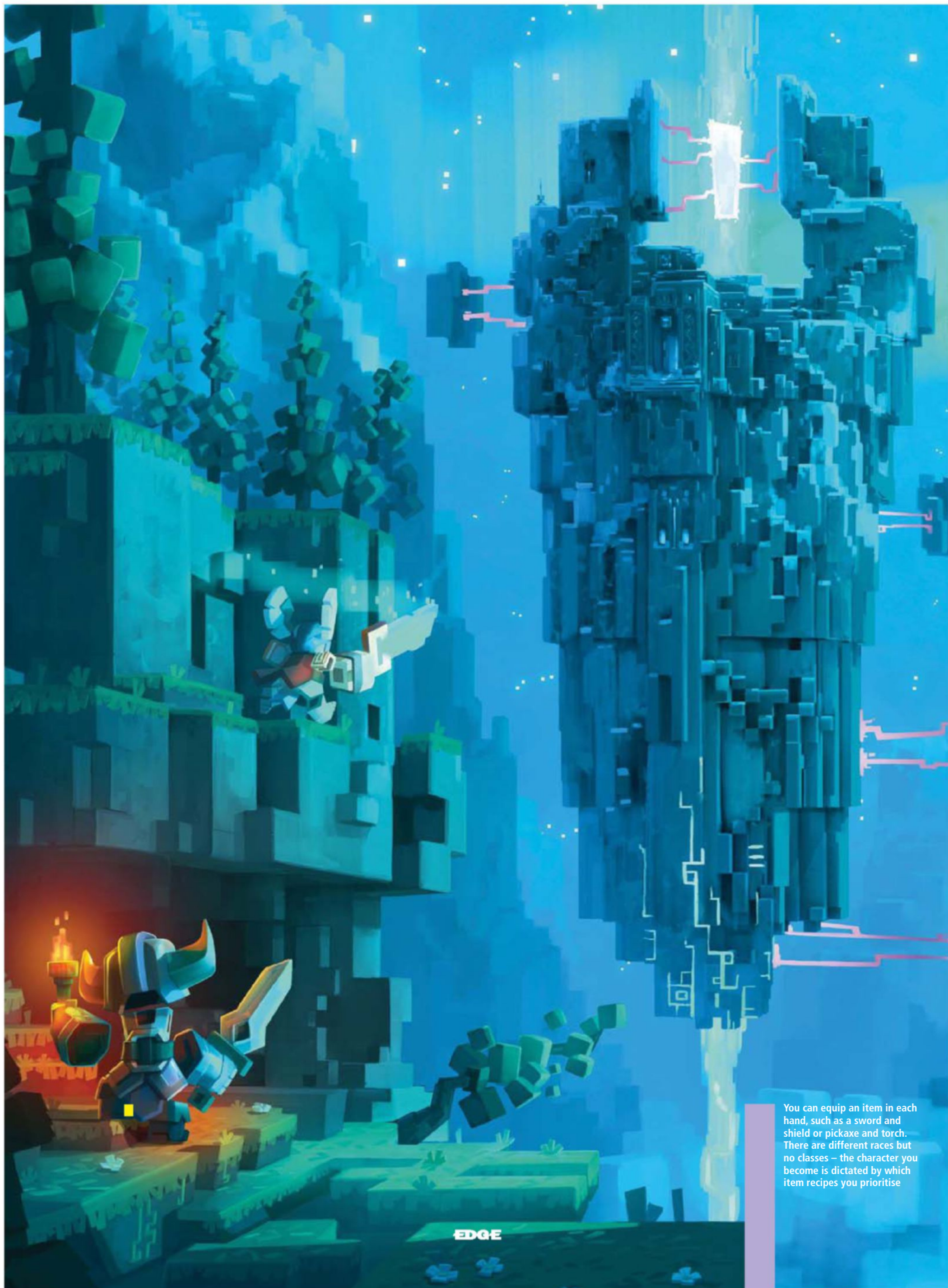
You can equip an item in each hand, such as a sword and shield or pickaxe and torch. There are different races but no classes – the character you become is dictated by which item recipes you prioritise

There's an ecosystem of sorts – wolves will prey on sheep, for example. You'll also be able to cross-breed animals to create oddities

a sandbox ready to swallow up every hour you throw at it, *SkySaga* is structured to feel more like a chapter-based campaign. Fisher cites Joseph Campbell's 1949 text on narratology, The Hero With A Thousand Faces, as another inspiration. "Every myth, every story builds from the same shape. You need something that you can't get in your home, so you push out into the unknown. You have that moment of greatest reward that's also the moment of greatest threat. You overcome that threat and obtain a new skill. You return home with a story to tell, you improve your home, and then you continue around that loop."

SkySaga **players begin** on a home island, a persistent slab of floating rock that's yours to break down, build up, excavate and beautify as desired. It's here, untroubled by wildlife and with the aid of furnaces and worktables, that you'll hammer together the majority of the weapons, tools and equipment you need to roam farther afield. This includes keystones, which are plugged into a portal at the island's heart to unlock the way to other islands, with rarer breeds of keystone corresponding to the more hazardous wintry or desert islands that play host to the most exotic raw materials. Fisher's hope is that doughty players will club together to plunder these challenging environs — co-op support is omnipresent, with options to check guest player meddling on home islands — and flog the items they make to others for in-game gold. The game's microtransaction model has yet to be nailed down, meanwhile, but is supposedly limited to cosmetic items and progression boosters.

The worlds you venture to are procedurally generated and tested for coherency on a server in advance, so that they're ready to go once summoned; all you're doing is downloading the file. Each is built to suit broad criteria, such as the number of interiors, and support an estimated 40 minutes of play, spanning a main quest — perhaps a trip to a castle, though no two castles will be laid out or furnished alike — plus smaller attractions such as villages and caves. You can spend longer in the field if you want, and given that adventure islands vanish after the first visit, it's best to suck the most lucrative specimens

dry. But the menagerie of wolves, bears, skeletons and bioluminescent, bug-eyed critters grow more ferocious as day sinks into night, and you can only make your exit via a portal. This gentle pressure to seek an exit helps sessions build to a natural crescendo. "You've got to look at how people play," says Philip. "They play in sessions. There's no point in making something that's going to be an endless thing, because at some point you have to put it down."

All of this is, of course, as much the result of attention to user behaviour in and around *Minecraft* as it is another articulation of Blitz's former strengths. The sharp split between home and wilderness environments is aimed, Fisher adds, at frontier types who want to build a nest without worrying about its place within a continually unfolding world. "In *Minecraft* and other open-world games, if you've established a home, you get more and

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Fisher's hope is that doughty players will club together to plunder challenging environs

more reluctant to explore away from that. You either start again, and junk all the work you've done, or you begin to almost resent the game."

SkySaga's development up to and after launch will draw heavily on the patterns of its community, with technical alphas underway. The feedback will inform everything from interface tweaks to celebrating the players or groups who uncover the most coveted items by writing their feats into the game's as-yet-undivulged background fiction. It's a well-trodden approach, but as with so much of *SkySaga*, there's a dash of spice: the developer won't advertise new items and features, which means that player discoveries might really feel like discoveries.

Such a process of give-and-take could be key to the game's future, as players tug it away from influences that, while rethought, can be hard to see past. *SkySaga* can't be reduced to what it borrows from *Minecraft*, or what it gleans from the wreckage of Blitz, but in the absence of conspicuous innovation, it risks being lost in the shadow of both. ∎
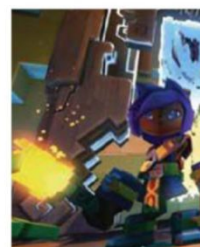
High block
Smilegate's impact on development will probably be most apparent in the PvP multiplayer, which supports traditional modes such as capture the flag as well as the full range of mining and crafting options. The Korean company's flagship game is *CrossFire*, a free-to-play *Counter-Strike* homage that has quietly amassed an active playerbase to rival that of Riot's *League Of Legends*. "Their game is being played in 80 different countries – they have the highest maximum concurrency of users," says Radiant COO **Richard Smithies**. "So there are some lessons that they can bring across." Perfecting PvP is important, he says, if *SkySaga* is to find a following in Korea, where MMOG players tend to gravitate towards competitive multiplayer earlier.

TOP **Radiant Worlds says it envisages** *Infinite Isles* **as the first in a series. "We see so much potential; we've really only just scratched the surface," says Philip Oliver.**
ABOVE **Home islands aside, Radiant Worlds is looking into the idea of guild islands – perhaps reached by airship.**
MAIN **Bungie's viral I Love Bees campaign for** *Halo 2* **is an inspiration for** *SkySaga*'s **background story, which must be pieced together like the components for an item**

TOP *SkySaga*'s **proprietary engine, Meandros, supports some sophisticated realtime lighting. It will last the game for "a good few years", according to the Olivers.**
RIGHT **You can lock items away in chests to stave off kleptomaniacs during meetings on home islands**

S O M A

Frictional plans to shake up horror, and players, all over again

By now, fans of horror games will be uncomfortably familiar with the insides of lockers. Ever since Frictional Games so effectively made hiding or fleeing your only recourse in 2010's *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, the act of cowering in a closet while your pursuer lingers outside for just too long before it moves on has become standard practice. But familiarity can be the enemy of a good scare and Frictional's follow-up, *Soma*, is entering a genre defined by its predecessor.

"When we were promoting *Amnesia*, we released a gameplay trailer where the player is chased by an unseen monster and hides in a closet, waiting for it to go away," creative director **Thomas Grip** tells us. "At the time, that felt really fresh and was a simple way to get people interested. Five years later, it's no longer very special. That's a great motivation for trying something else."

Still, *The Dark Descent* did stand out at a time when the genre was becoming focused on action, a directional shift led by *Resident Evil 5* and *Dead Space*. But it was more than just a game of deadly hide-and-seek. "I feel there's been too much focus on the 'hunted by monsters' aspect," Grip says. "There are other features that I also felt made the game special, but that have been hardly adopted at all. For instance, we tried to create puzzles that fit with the flow and thematics of a horror game, such as the water monster encounter or the ones connected to torture devices. I also think we had a pretty strong focus on story, while many of the recent horror games hardly try to tell a compelling narrative at all.

"I think this might have set up slightly wrong expectations for *Soma*, because many people remember *Amnesia* as a game where you run around screaming 'OMG! OMG!' while monsters chase you. But in reality, only 20 per cent or so is about that."

Soma does feature a take on monsters, but the real horror comes from its exploration of consciousness and the self. Trapped in PATHOS-2, an undersea research station,

protagonist Simon must establish why he is there and why the machines around him are starting to exhibit human qualities. There are other staff trapped down here with you, too, and you'll happen across ocean life, but also face something entirely unexpected: humour.

"It really comes naturally from the world we have created," Grip explains when we ask him about an encounter with a robot that acts like an injured human, and is frustrated at your apparent lack of motivation to help. "Some of the things you encounter are so bizarre at first that it's hard to not also find them a bit comical. We've tried to keep it at a reasonable level throughout the game — we don't want the characters to crack jokes all of the time — and make it arise naturally from the creepy nature of the subjects. We found that if everybody was just super-serious, it removed some of the authenticity to it all."

Ensuring that you never know whether to laugh or scream introduces a fitting wave of discomfort for a game that deals in themes of identity and body horror, but Frictional's attempt to go beyond traditional videogame horror tropes has made explaining exactly what *Soma* is a bit of a headache for Grip.

"If I try to promote *Amnesia*, I can just tell you about peeking through a door to see what is making that noise, or how you can make a barricade to avoid being killed," he explains. "In *Soma*, we try to evoke a sense of dread in other ways, but these are much harder to talk about. Hard Candy is a movie I found really scary and disturbing, yet it is hard to explain exactly why without spoiling it. Compare that to Paranormal Activity, where I can easily sum it up as 'a poltergeist tormenting a family and its activities are captured on a camera'. While there's much I love about Paranormal Activity, the horror is not exactly subtle. *Soma* still has monsters chasing you, but that's a secondary part of the horror experience. It's just there to build up a certain mood in the player. The payoff comes from a different direction." ■

Terror incognita

Grip is a fan of games such as *Outlast* and *Alien: Isolation*, but feels that too little is being done to move the horror genre forward. "A pet peeve of mine in many recent horror games is the problem of players getting used to repeated use of similar mechanics. I think too many [devs] look for an answer at the lower level. For instance, there many games now that try to give a spin to the hunter-and-hunted mechanic to make it feel fresh, but I think that's approaching the problem in the wrong way. Instead the solution should be found at a higher level in how the narrative is structured, the story background, or the entire setup to the situation. In *Soma*, we don't show the monsters to the player very much, so there is never really any time to figure out how they work."

Thomas Grip, creative director, Frictional

TOP **While Frictional's past games have tasked players with uncovering someone else's story through notes and recordings, *Soma* will focus on your path instead.**
LEFT **"The idea is to make the player experience a sort of existential angst as they progress through the game," Grip explains. "I want them to feel this lump of coldness in their bellies as some of the issues really hit home"**

TOP **The game takes place both within and outside of the research station, and Grip admits that making an engine that can handle two drastically different sound environments has been surprisingly challenging.**
RIGHT **The real dread sets in several hours into the game when players fully realise the ramifications of their situation, but *Soma*'s underwater environments are disquieting enough**

MASSIVE CHALICE

Drinking deep of Double Fine's other Kickstarter

Cadence invasions tend to come in multiple locations at once, so whichever you react to leaves another spot in worsening condition. Each region can take three unchecked attacks, leaving you to balance peril levels with the mission rewards

Orange is the new black, at least when it comes to videogame corruption. First Xbox One brought us *Sunset Overdrive*'s tartrazine monstrosities, and now Double Fine's strategy-game-cum-genealogy-manipulator is driven by a threat called the Cadence that nibbles away at its beleaguered fantasy kingdom with vivid tangerine ooze. As usual, you are called upon to save the realm, which here means defending it on the field of turn-based battle until the colossal sentient cup has charged its world-saving power. Unlike usual, however, your party won't be polishing this quest off in a few days and then propping up their +5 boots of foot odour at the local brewhouse — it's going to take generations to get the job done.

At least these aeons won't be dull. As you'd expect from a game that swaps the usual evil-forces palette (lich purple, none-more-black, demonic red) for chunder orange, *Massive Chalice* is colourful in all senses of the word. One of the earliest choices is between joke names and serious ones for the

heroic bloodlines under your command, and every character is rendered in a charmingly chunky faux-low-poly style that carries over to the often brightly hued maps. The fighting that takes place upon them borrows its basic mechanics from Firaxis's *XCOM*, though simplified to the base constituents of a two-part catchment area for movement — keep within the orange zone to follow up your move with an action, while pushing into the larger white area consumes that unit's turn — and growing bars of unit abilities, with cover and tiered structures absent. Also gone, sadly, is the vague indication of where enemies are when you're lost, which can gum up the pace.

Tactical complexity here instead relies on the interplay between enemies and the hero classes, lent further nuance by the genes of the individuals at hand. Broadly, Caberjacks are your tanks and heavy hitters, specialising in swinging a thwacking great log at anything foolish enough to get close. Hunters carry shoulder-mounted bows as tall as a human and double as scouts via a camouflaging

FROM TOP **Seeds are the Cadence's basic foot soldier, weak on their lonesome, but able to slaughter a hero in large numbers; Ruptures, meanwhile, rush to your troops and then explode, spreading corrosive gloop**

Gay pride

Being a Kickstarter-funded project, *Massive Chalice* has been subject to input from its backers. And while the gaming community is often not given much credit for its inclusiveness, it was a forum thread that brought up the lack of gay marriage in the game back in mid-2013. Project lead Brad Muir and the team have responded in the very best way possible: by not only adding the option to partner up same-sex couples, but thinking about ways to make them work in a design that revolves around childbirth. They can now care for children that need adopting, or you can simply retire two guys or girls in the same structure and ship them together yourself. It's not in your face, and no one has to engage with it, but its presence here is a sign some players do want to progress beyond blanket heteronormativity.

Permadeath looms over every mission, dodgy decisions threatening to wipe your charges from existence. Since death from old age is inevitable, it doesn't pay to get too attached to individuals, but bloodlines matter

You want your best heroes to settle down at some point and start raising a progeny of their own, but leave it too late and their fertility will suffer. Such are the thorny considerations of being the realm's supreme defender

movement power, though the trade-off for range is vulnerability when caught out up close. The wild card is the Alchemist, armed with a scoop blade which does decent damage when scything at a Cadence's face, but which can also be used to lob explosive flasks with mild inaccuracy from a finite supply.

Still, heroes in *Massive Chalice* are both born and made, each bearing a list of traits drawn from their genes, personality and age that, alongside an ability tree, affects how they play. A fumble-fingered Alchemist is a terror to both sides, but the lone-wolf bonus can make for an excellent scout. It still feels cerebrally slighter than its inspiration, like something *XCOM*'s Commander might play on his day off, but cheeky enemy powers — such as the Bulwark's reactive shell, which shrugs off damage after the first hit in a turn, or a Lapse's XP-sapping blasts — do enough to keep target-priority decisions engaging.

The toughest and best choices come between missions. While a base that needs building and upgrades that need researching sound trivial at first, every endeavour takes several in-game years. On the main map screen, you can fast-forward so the decades slip by in seconds, but your heroes will age

and eventually die of natural causes — if Cadence incursions don't claim them first — so you'll have to ensure a fresh supply. And that means you should get them breeding.

Build a keep and once it's ready you can appoint one hero to preside over it with another as their spouse, though both are then retired from your active pool. The more experienced they are, the more they'll pass along to any kids, who will also inherit some of their genetic traits. All of a sudden you're playing Francis Galton and selecting for desirable combinations, a programme of eugenics propping up other considerations such as virility. In context, it's delightfully, if gently, subversive. Supporting buildings also help the cause, but again deplete the available hero stock to use. And so you come to a delicate balance between having enough heroes on hand to fight for the future and enough in noncombat roles to ensure there will be a future worth fighting for.

Available via Early Access now, *Massive Chalice* is already good enough to have its own bright future ahead of it. Yes, the text has a few little holes, but the bigger issue is that the Cadence could do with picking up in variety faster, perhaps also introducing more variety as a whole, to make the turn-based play feel a touch meatier. A bit more polish on its already-favourable traits could deliver a game to make its ancestors proud. ∎
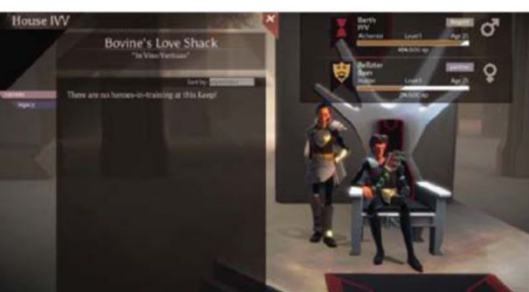
JUST CAUSE 3

Publisher Square Enix **Developer** Avalanche Software **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** 2015

We thought Avalanche's New York studio had been a bit on the quiet side. Opened in 2011, it's taken three years to show its cards, but what a hand it is. *Just Cause 3* transplants Rico Rodriguez from Southeast Asia to the turquoise waters and cerulean skies of the Mediterranean, refines and expands his toyset, and gives Avalanche the chance to work its magic on current-gen hardware. Sadly, there'll be no equivalent – at least at launch – of the fan-made multiplayer mod that gave *Just Cause 2* such longevity. Look on the bright side, though: at least it's not free-to-play, as the rumour mill had long suggested it would be.

SPLATOON

Publisher/developer Nintendo (EAD Group No 2) **Format** Wii U
Origin Japan **Release** Q2 2015

Nintendo's striking online shooter will ship with a singleplayer story, too. In Hero mode, players will set out to retrieve the appropriately named Battery Catfish, which provides *Splatoon*'s world with its energy, from the nefarious Octopus Corps. Expect platforming challenges, a lo-fi sidescrolling section, and an awful lot of paint squirting. It should provide a much-needed intro to the game's unusual shooter mechanics before you squid-jump into the online arena.

DUNGEON DEFENDERS II

Publisher/developer Trendy Entertainment **Format** PC, PS4
Origin US **Release** 2015

Pick your heroes, set your traps, and brace yourself against waves of fantasy creatures in this tower-defence/RPG hybrid. What sets *Dungeon Defenders 2* apart from the likes of *Orcs Must Die!* is a rich character builder, colourful cartoon visuals, and a variable threat courtesy of the canny Wave Director.

AMERICAN TRUCK SIMULATOR

Publisher Excalibur Publishing **Developer** SCS Software
Format PC **Origin** Czech Republic **Release** February 20

Sneer all you like: driving a lorry full of apples from Frankfurt to Southampton while listening to a Czech hip hop station in *Euro Truck Simulator 2* is oddly brilliant. As the title suggests, SCS's next game transplants the format across the Atlantic. First up is California, then Arizona, with more due via addons.

DONUT COUNTY

Publisher/developer Ben Esposito **Format** PC **Origin** US
Release TBA

There's a distinct note of *Katamari Damacy* in Ben Esposito's *Donut County* (formerly *Kachina*), in which you make the scenery disappear down a hole that grows with each carrot, fence post and henhouse swallowed. It's early days, but the game marries design flair with an easy charm that bodes well.

#275

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY
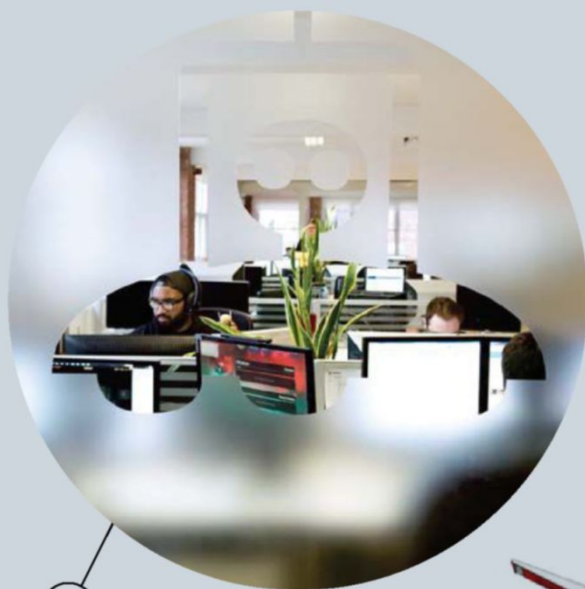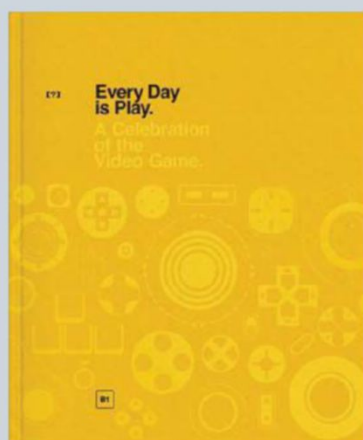
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Every Day is Play.
A Celebration of the Video Game.

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EDGE

END
GAME

After eight years, two
console generations
and a long delay,
Rocksteady is getting
ready to say farewell
to the Dark Knight

By Nathan Brown

A*rkham Knight* game director **Sefton Hill** is in reflective mood. He and his team are on the home stretch, in the final six months of work on the final game in the trilogy that made their studio's name. Rocksteady has been making *Batman* games for eight of its ten years in business. One day next spring, Hill will wake up and it will all be over.

"It dawned on me the other day that we're going to finish," he tells us in the boardroom of Rocksteady's North London offices. "It's going to be really weird. It's going to be like a marriage breakup or something, because I'm sort of obsessed with it. I wake up in the morning and it's the first thing I think of. When I'm speaking to someone, if you could Ctrl-Alt-Delete my brain, my system resources are always 90 per cent making this game and ten per cent having a conversation."

Hill has less than six months to work out what to engage the bulk of his grey matter with next. He has ideas already, though none are being worked on yet. Rocksteady is, unusually for a studio of its size, a one-project operation, its 160 staff focused solely on laying this trilogy to rest. The prospect of moving on may be unsettling, but it has also been liberating for *Arkham Knight*'s creators. "We didn't want to leave any stone unturned; we wanted to put everything in," Hill says. "That's always been our attitude, to be honest. We make every game like it's the last game we're ever going to make."

Playing it — and we are the first outside of Rocksteady and Warner to do so — you can see his point. Batman's existing moveset has been both refined and expanded, his utility belt and toolset has grown too, and he will put all of it to use in the biggest, most detailed world that Rocksteady has ever created. That alone might be a fine way to say goodbye, but not for Hill. *Arkham Asylum* was about stealth and combat; *City* added freedom and flowing means to traverse open spaces. Mere refinement of existing systems is not the way Rocksteady works. There has to be something else.

The Batmobile is the answer, and it feels weird to be behind its wheel at first. It should, really. After all, it is an almost indestructible, remotely controllable tank-cum-supercar, and we're guiding it around the modest courtyards and tight corners of Gotham's Ace Chemicals facility. It seems an odd choice for a demo: the Batmobile, surely, was built for the open road, a necessary inclusion as Rocksteady expands its take on Gotham to encompass a space five times the size of Arkham City, giving players an alternative to endlessly grapple-boosting the Caped Crusader across miles of open world. In fact, Hill explains, Rocksteady came at it the other way round.

"It was never a case of us wanting to build a bigger Gotham," he tells us. "For us, it's about richness and detail, life and feel. It's not about size; it was never really a consideration when we made *City*, and it's not really a consideration here. It was more about what we wanted to introduce, and the Batmobile was there right at the start. We had some cool ideas."

He's not wrong. Yes, you can use the Batmobile to cover a lot of ground in a short space of time, and deploy its mounted weaponry to clear out a roadside threat, but Rocksteady has gone further than that, building the car in the same way it has designed every new addition to the *Arkham* series as it has progressed. It is made to complement, not surmount. "That's always been very important," says player code director **Adam Doherty**, who has worked on all three *Arkham* games and understands Rocksteady's Batman as well as anyone. "One of our core goals was that we didn't want to put in a Batmobile that was just there for shooting sections, or getting from A to B." For all that we'd have loved to have put it through its paces on the open road, Ace Chemicals is the Batmobile's ideal debut, an opportunity to show how it has been built first and foremost to serve Batman, not shunt him off centre stage. ▶

FROM TOP **Sefton Hill, game director; Adam Doherty, player code director**

ABOVE **Hill may not be giving much away about the story, but online there's plenty of theorising about the Arkham Knight's identity. Depending on who you choose to believe, he could be a robot, the Joker, disgraced mayor Quincy Sharp, Jason Todd or a number of other rogues. The studio has been emphatic that he's not an existing DC player, but a villain of its own creation, so only Sharp and the robot even vaguely fit the bill**
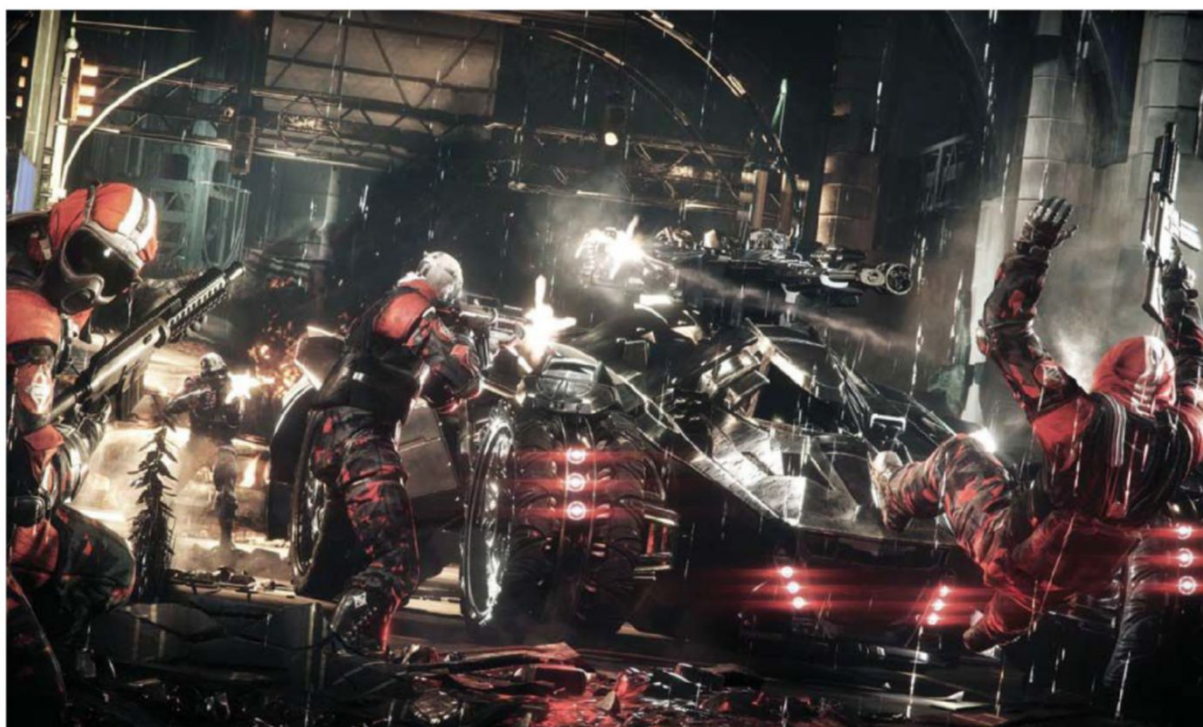
RIGHT **Given that the Batmobile is invulnerable to small munitions fire, scenes like this seem almost unfair on the poor militia, though they've got access to more powerful weapons too. When you start targeting humans, the vehicle automatically uses non-lethal rounds**

"BATMAN'S NOT BEEN NERFED TO MAKE THE CAR MORE POWERFUL. IN FACT, HE'S BEEN BUFFED"

It's why, during one combat section with the Batmobile parked nearby, a new button prompt appears. We press X and Square and dragon punch an opponent into the air before the Batmobile knocks him back to the floor again with a tranquilliser round to the head. Outside of brawls, a built-in winch pulls down heavy doors to let our hero enter new areas, and raises and lowers a broken lift to lead him to hostages. The Batmobile is never more than a button press away from being at our side, and during puzzle sections we find ourselves switching constantly, and fluidly, between the Dark Knight and his vehicle.

"We worked to make sure it feels like it was always part of Batman's universe," Hill explains. "It doesn't disrupt the original core set of moves; it totally integrates with them and really becomes part of Batman. They're not really separate entities. It's the ultimate gadget." Its remote control sits in the same radial menu as the Batarang and Batclaw, positioning it as an extension of Batman's core abilities, designed to give more options within existing systems, not simply add a whole new one on top of them.

Even when the focus is squarely on the Batmobile, it sticks to house style. Squeeze L2 and it switches to Battle mode, the left stick making it strafe instead of steer, the right trigger shooting instead of accelerating, taps of X performing quick directional boost dodges. Later, we'll learn that Battle mode is ideal for navigating tight spaces, but we've got rather more pressing concerns at the moment. Facing off against a courtyard full of drone tanks, we're told that clean play is as rewarded here as it is in melee combat; a translucent line shows the enemy's intended line of fire, and it glows red a moment before a shot is fired. While perhaps not as elegant, and certainly not as intuitive, as throwing punches, Batmobile combat is still a balance of attack and defence, of dispatching a screenful of enemies without taking so much as a scratch. After two or three too many retries, it all clicks into place, and a flawless fight concludes with us double-tapping a

face button so that the final two drones fall to our homing missiles. Longer combos will yield more powerful weaponry still. And just as in any *Arkham* game, enemies that require specific tactics to bring down soon arrive to complicate matters. One later in our demo fires three rounds at once in a forked pattern, and can only be damaged with weakspot strikes from your cooldown-managed grenade launcher. It is a very Rocksteady approach to vehicular combat, and it works.

Yet the Batmobile posed a challenge to many more people than just those designing it. In fact, it has impacted on just about every other area of the game. A supercar demands a vast network of roads; a tank demands that they be wide. As such, *Arkham Knight* not only had to zone out a larger portion of Gotham, but its structures had to grow taller to match the scale of the streets. The enemy threat had to be ramped up to account for a vehicle that takes no damage from falls, collisions or small weapons fire, hence the presence of the titular Arkham Knight and his invading drone army. The audio team had to come up with a convincing engine sound for a vehicle that does not exist. And Batman himself had to be tweaked to ensure players didn't feel Rocksteady was closing out the trilogy by toning him down. Out in the world, an extra upgrade for *Arkham City*'s grapple boost flings you higher and faster than before, while taller buildings mean you can pick up more speed by diving, covering longer distances quickly.

"Batman's not been nerfed to make the car more powerful. In fact, he's been buffed. We've got a really nice balance," Hill tells us. "Internally, we have some people who use the car a lot more, and some who use the gliding more. It's up to the player. I'm playing the game a lot at the moment — it's a lovely stage of the project: you're just playing, reviewing, writing up lists of tasks — and I constantly switch up the way I play. I'm not doing it to test the game, I'm doing it because I enjoy it. If I ever find I'm erring ▶

DAVID HEGO
ART DIRECTOR

The game world is five times the size of *Arkham City*'s. How do you break it up?
It's broken down into three subsections. We had to step up our game in a way: we didn't just want to do something bigger, we wanted to inject something new. In the last game, everything was brownstone style, with a twist of Gothic. In this one we've gone a bit neo-Gothic. In the downtown area, we needed a lot more verticality to balance out the roads being wider for Batmobile gameplay. Then we have the GCPD area, which is a bit more industrial. The third island is an extension of what we did in *City*.

How do you design architecture in areas that have featured in previous games?
We played with the concept of Gotham being rebuilt on top of itself. In the previous game, you saw the old part of the city… We tried to create a kind of layer cake – the idea is Gotham doesn't erase all the mistakes they're making, they're just rebuilding over the top. It's a bit abstract, and it makes for an interesting clash between old buildings and steel beams and glass.

Is there much back and forth with Warner over character designs?
For the top-tier characters – all the heroes and villains – we need to have a close relationship with Warner and DC. But it's a relationship that is now seven years old. Through the different games, and the success they've had, there's trust. They've been generally very open.

What about the design teams? It must be tricky to build a world in which every single surface can be grappled on and jumped off.
Something that is sure across everything is that gameplay is king. If we need to dismantle something and build it in a different way to provide that experience of being Batman, we will. The tricky part is keeping all these things in check: the distance between two objects, the height, how it feels. You can't put a statue too close to a building – if you grapple boost, you'll bang into it. For a long time, there was an artist who specialised in the bridge between design and art, making sure what we built conformed to the design, to smooth navigation.

What do you want players to get from *Arkham Knight* that they didn't from *City*?
We've made a huge step in terms of tech. We've started to liberate ourselves from the tools and make a big step in what I call visual narration – making really meaningful environments and characters with backstory. It's not just pixels for the sake of pixels – we try to add a second reading to everything we do. We've got a brand-new lighting shader; the engine's really impressive. We've got an amazing engine team that's opened all the doors to the new generation.

ABOVE **Hill says the series' fighting system stemmed from his frustration at the opaqueness and complexity of most thirdperson combat games. Maintaining its core simplicity as the series has progressed has been a fine balancing act**

RIGHT **The Arkham Knight's militia set up checkpoints in the world that make terra firma a dangerous place for Batman on foot. Clear them out, however, and the enemy threat in the vicinity will thin out**

COUNTLESS GAMES HAVE BORROWED FROM IT, BUT NONE HAVE EVER BETTERED ITS ZEN-LIKE FLOW

ABOVE **There's no sign of the Batmobile's importance more telling than that you call it with the same button that once used to activate Detective Mode. The latter, now mapped to the D-pad, is still vital, though you can only use it on foot.**
LEFT **While gadgets such as the Batarang are still selected from a radial menu, efforts have been made to streamline the process. Explosive gel, for example, is now a context-sensitive action when Batman is standing in front of a destructible surface** ▶

FAR LEFT **An in-house mocap studio is a rarity, but here it's part of life. "You'll be there eating your lunch,"** Walker says, **"and there'll be someone next to you covered in ping-pong balls, weights and a headcam."** LEFT **A glass cabinet in the boardroom houses Batman: Black & White statuettes.** BELOW **The whole studio shares the same open-plan space. Departments are laid out logically: animation next to design, and the QA team by the coders**
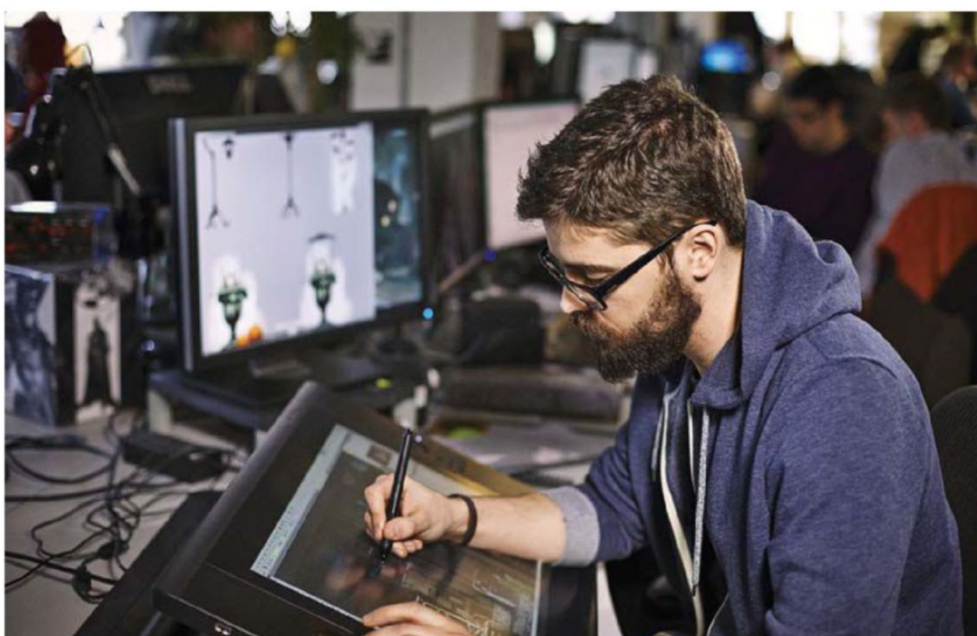
WIGGLE ROOM

Every computer on every desk on Rocksteady's open-plan development floor has the same screensaver. It's a slideshow of org charts, a personal profile for each of the studio's 160 staff, and a recruitment timeline that shows how the company has grown in tandem with the scope of its games. Over the years, Rocksteady has gradually taken over more of the former carpet factory in North London's Kentish Town in which it's based, but it has not grown solely to accommodate its rising headcount. Its most recent expansion two years ago saw it build a bigger kitchen and communal dining space, but much of Rocksteady's growth has focused on making it easier to make games. Having your own vocal booths may

save money, but as co-founder and studio director **Jamie Walker** explains, it's about more than that.

"The reason we built these [booths] is to bring everything that makes a difference here, rather than outsourcing," he tells us. "We do a lot of work in LA; the voice of Batman, Kevin Conroy, lives in LA, and as soon as he gets on the plane, the meter's running. He's amazing, but it's much more effective to record that in LA. But where we can, we bring people here: Andy [Quinn, sound designer] can record it, it can go straight into the game and people can see the difference straight away. Having it here makes a lot of sense."

QA has been brought in-house, too, with 20 staff tucked away next

to the programmers. If more are needed as June nears, Walker plans to put them in the ping-pong area.

The jewel in the studio's crown, however, is its motion-capture studio. It, too, has grown – Rocksteady learned what Walker calls "the dark arts of mocap" in a small corner of the studio, but now it is so big that the space is also used for company meetings and training sessions. Many studios would kill to have such a facility in-house, and Rocksteady certainly makes the most of it.

"Some companies might do three or four shoots for an entire game. We do three or four a week," Walker explains. "Animators here will get to a certain point in the week where they have an hour's worth of stuff

to shoot, they'll suit up and come in. It's very low maintenance: you just turn everything on, get in the suit and start shooting. And by the end of the day, it's in the game."

You might think that getting an animator to do an actor's job is a fool's errand, but Walker points out that the team knows exactly what it wants, and if it needs a specific action, it's quicker to just do it than explain it. If you're sceptical, consider this: Harley Quinn's lascivious sashay was performed by a Rocksteady animator. One of its male ones. It's all part of Walker's philosophy, which is well reflected by the black-and-white theme that runs through the décor. "The idea is that we're the colour," he says. "The studio is just a tool."

Jamie Walker, studio director and co-founder

too much on one side, then obviously we're doing something wrong."

It is an open-world parallel to the balance Rocksteady strikes between combat and stealth, giving you options and only occasionally insisting that you use one or the other. The former is the *Arkham* games' greatest design, and its most influential too; countless games have borrowed it, but none have ever bettered its Zen-like flow of a fight well won. That, too, has been refined. New players will appreciate the spectacle — the Batmobile assists, the context-sensitive environmental takedowns — but veterans will be more interested in the little changes. There are more enemy animations — Doherty points out that every opponent in *Arkham Asylum* and *City* shared the same punch and kick. Some enemies charge at you, and must be taken down with a quick Batarang throw, something that has long been optional in *Arkham*'s combat but is now frequently essential. A tightly executed counter will push your opponent back, knocking down any enemies behind them, something that, in the previous games, could have meant the end of your combo, since a downed enemy could not be struck except with a knockout blow. Now, you can land a lightly damaging hit on enemies while they're down, or pick them back up for another pummelling, ensuring Batman's flow remains unbroken.

"I think our secret is primarily an obsessive attention to detail," Doherty says. "Every move that goes in, we make sure it has a purpose and we make sure that all the timings are just perfect. And there's always a window after a move where you get an opportunity to counter, no matter what they're doing — they'll just slow down their animation a little bit. We want the player to feel like what they're doing is awesome, regardless of how good they are."

That ethos extends to *Arkham Knight*'s stealth, too, where the new Fear Takedown sees Batman taking out three enemies in quick succession. We drop onto the first from the ceiling, point the camera to the next and press Square to take out the second, then do the same to the third. What would, in *Arkham*s past, have been a drawn-out process of isolating and dispatching the group one by one has been completed in seconds. It adds a note of the combat system's fluidity

to something that has always necessarily been more staccato and thus feels, Doherty believes, more appropriate to the character.

"You can play the whole thing like *Metal Gear* or *Splinter Cell* — do everything silently, perfectly, without alerting the room. But in some ways, that's not particularly Batman. If you watch the movies, he never does a Silent Takedown. Someone always hears it. We wanted a way to empower the player to aggressively take on groups of enemies."

There's a fine line between empowered and overpowered, and as a concept the Fear Takedown leans towards the latter, but it's been balanced cleverly. It has to be recharged with a Silent Takedown, you have to get up close to be able to use it at all, and if you take out three mooks and the fourth has a rifle, you're still in a pickle. It's the kind of gentle refinement to a core system that can make all the difference for a sequel, but getting such tweaks right is a parlous balance that requires an awful lot of work.

It's nothing like the extra work mandated by the leap to new console hardware. Almost

everyone we speak to has a story of how taking the *Arkham* series from 360 and PS3 to Xbox One and PS4 has both empowered and frustrated them. Yes, you can do much more, but it means you have much more to do to make it happen. The problem with reaching for the skies is that they are quite far away.

The benefits are immediately obvious, and it's almost impossible to believe that *Arkham Knight* runs on the same engine as its predecessors. Staggeringly, it's based on Unreal Engine 3, albeit a version that by now is so heavily modified it is essentially Rocksteady's own, a line we've heard before but which is hard to argue with when you see the game in motion. Loading up *Arkham City* for comparison, it's clear to see that Rocksteady once had to sacrifice detail for the sake of scale. Here, it can have both.

We express our surprise that publisher Warner Bros sanctioned the move; after all, like so many others, the company has hedged

"YOU CAN PLAY THE WHOLE THING LIKE METAL GEAR OR SPLINTER CELL — DO EVERYTHING SILENTLY, PERFECTLY"

its bets, with recent releases — and the forthcoming *Mortal Kombat X* — appearing as cross-gen titles. But for Hill, the choice was obvious: you can't make the best game you possibly can if you hamstring yourself by catering for ten-year-old console hardware.

"Very, very early on, we had discussions about doing cross-gen," he says. "When we were looking at it, we realised that there were compromises we would need to make with the layout of the city. There were certain areas we could only have Batman get to, and certain areas we could only have the Batmobile. 'Compromise' is not a word that sits well with me. If we're doing it like that, we may as well not do the Batmobile; if we want to integrate it fully then it has to be on a machine that can deliver it. It was a really bold decision by Warner. At the time [we made the choice], no one knew what the uptake on next-gen was going to be like. It's been brilliant, which is great for us and great for the industry, but it was bold."

It was a decision, however, that has come at significant cost. To those who saw the ▶

NICK ARUNDEL
AUDIO DIRECTOR

Audio plays a huge role in making an open world feel like a place, and *Arkham Knight*'s world is bigger than ever. How has your approach changed?
Our problem is scale, on two axes: the sheer real estate involved, and in each game there's been more and more detail. There's a tension between the increasing size of the city and the level of detail you want. It's had to be a new approach to cope with this huge space and to manage the amount of detail we had to add.

Arkham City was very hand-rolled; every alley and street had its own volume, with points of sound. When we looked at the scale of [*Arkham Knight*'s] city, we knew there was no way we could do that. We needed a generative system that would produce and play sounds, rather than relying on what would probably have been 30 sound designers.

What else does code do for the game's audio?
A good example is the rain system. On *City*, we tagged each surface and said, 'When rain impacts on this, it's going to produce a rain-on-wood sound'. So on a glass cabinet, we'd have tagged the metal bits and the glass bits. Now there's a generative system that runs in realtime and scans around Batman and

reports back, and spawns the right rain sound. If [the art team on *Arkham City*] changed a wooden floor to a metal one, we'd have to go back and retag it. Now the game just knows it's a metal floor.

The city size is one thing, but how has the move to new consoles impacted on the way you do your job?
We worry less now. Towards the end of *City* we really worried about fitting it on a 360 disc. We had to be quite selective about how many surround streams we had, whereas now most of the assets – certainly most of the environmental sounds – are multichannel. We don't really think about it. We now have lots of music in surround, whereas all the music in *City* was stereo – though there's a structure to it, a specific gameplay reason. We could never really afford to do it before.

How did you design the Batmobile's sound?
That was, without doubt, the biggest challenge. There's so much history there that we really didn't want to get it wrong. It was really tough, and I'm not ever going to say how we did it. It really is no one thing. It's absolutely loads of things. My worry was that, because we were taking elements from so many different places, it wouldn't sound like one car. We went through a long time when we weren't sure; it was 90 per cent there, but we weren't happy with it. So we stripped it all back and went through another set of recordings, another set of vehicles, assembled it again, and it gelled. Andrew Quinn, our sound designer, looked after it. He'll have been on it for a year, easily.

game behind closed doors at the Game Developers Conference last March, a 2014 release always seemed ambitious, and so it would prove. Rocksteady needed more time, and Warner ended up delaying its most important 2014 release by almost eight months. "The vision for the game just meant we weren't going to get it finished to the standard we wanted in time," Hill says. "It's as simple as that. We had to decide: is it a case of reducing the scope to try to get something out? Or do we delay the release in order to make sure we can achieve the vision? That's the discussion we had with [Warner's] senior management. Fortunately, after a lot of grovelling, we got the time, because those guys believed in the vision too.

"The question was never whether it was good enough. It was whether we were going

"I don't want to spoil it," he says. "I'd hate to be a film director, because you craft this story and then someone goes and ruins it. I fight constantly to make sure we don't spoil anything. There are so many games now where you feel like you've seen all of the killer beats that would've been great to discover for yourself. It's this huge, epic conclusion. It's our strongest, most emotional story, and I'm really happy with what we've got. Because I'm happy with it, I'm not going to tell."

That Warner is prepared to indulge Hill and refrain from a story-spoiling trailer blitz says much about how Rocksteady has managed to earn the trust of one of the biggest media companies on the planet. The studio was granted a risky move to new consoles, afforded the extra time to make it

"IT'S THIS EPIC CONCLUSION. IT'S OUR STRONGEST, MOST EMOTIONAL STORY – I'M REALLY HAPPY WITH IT"

to get it done. I don't want to sound arrogant, but we were very confident in that direction. We just didn't have time to finish what we wanted to do. It's fair to say that's my fault: the reason we didn't ship in 2014 is because of the game I wanted to make. It couldn't be done in the time we had."

Hill's openness has its limits, however. While more than happy to take the blame for the delay, to admit his little flaws ("I'm quite OCD," he offers when explaining why he doesn't play his games after they've shipped), and to discuss his design philosophy, he's on lockdown about details of *Arkham Knight*'s story. We know that, with Joker supposedly out of the frame after *City*, Scarecrow is the primary antagonist, as interested in breaking Batman psychologically as physically. The Arkham Knight is intended to provide the latter kind of threat, though his costume suggests he has plans to do more than shoot people and flex his hired muscle. Tier-one villains — including Penguin, Two-Face and Harley Quinn — will return; Oracle and Commissioner Gordon will play a bigger role. Beyond that, Hill's giving nothing away.

happen, and on top of that is getting a say in how the game is marketed. Rocksteady has spent the best part of the decade proving to Warner Bros it understands what a *Batman* game should be better than anyone else on the planet. Soon, that won't be applicable.

"To think about something so much, for so long," Hill says, "and then suddenly to just have that not be there — it's such an identifiable character, and that universe…" He pauses, as if he's finally unhooking the remaining 90 per cent of his brain from the business of Batman and realising he's going to have to get used to it at some point. But not just yet. The beauty of making every game as if it's your last is that you never have to worry about the future.

"It's going to be strange, I know that. I'm not worried about what we do next, because of the talent of the people here. I'm super confident that whatever we do, we can make a success of it. The biggest thing that can guarantee the success of the next game is this game, so let's use our energy to finish this one. Then we'll worry about what comes next." From all we've seen, we're pretty sure Rocksteady is going to be just fine. ■

ABOVE **The Arkham Knight's design runs counter to Rocksteady's general art direction. "We step down all the technology in the world," Hego says. "We want Batman to be at least two steps ahead of everything else." But it seems that Bruce Wayne has at last met his technological match.**

LEFT **A tap of L1 brings the Batmobile almost instantly to your side, making it hard not to think of John Marston's devoted steed in** *Red Dead Redemption*. **"That horse broke my heart," Doherty says. "I called it, and it jumped off a cliff to get to me"**

Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra content
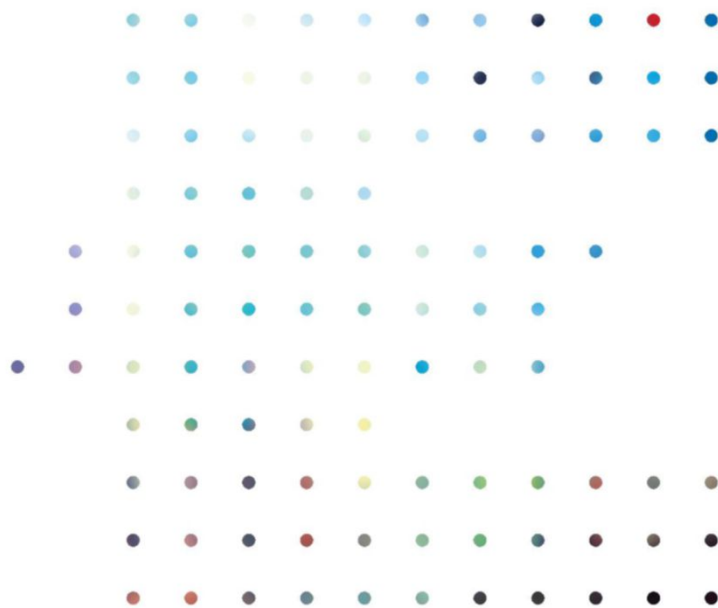
THE EDGE
AWARDS 2014

We always expected 2014 to be a transitional year, but we had no idea it would be quite like this. It was the year of the remaster, with the two best games of the previous 12 months reappearing alongside many other reissues. It was the year of the cross-gen game, with developers' desire to get the best out of new consoles stymied by their need to cater for old ones. And it was the year of the delay, with some of the heaviest hitters pushed towards the end of the calendar or off it entirely. There have been highlights, but it speaks volumes that only one PS4 or Xbox One exclusive makes our top ten this year. For the early adopters, 2014 was the year of looking forward to 2015.

It's been a curious year, then, but far from a disappointing one, and there are plenty of reasons to be cheerful elsewhere. Japan, for instance, is back to its best. Big studios have broken out of their comfort zones and into new genres, markets and business models with stunning success. Others have simply kept doing what they've always done, and done so better than ever. As ever, indies have kept pushing at the boundaries, challenging convention and subverting expectations. Wii U, meanwhile, has hit its stride in glorious fashion. PS4 and Xbox One may not be there yet, but there's still a good deal to celebrate in a medium that becomes richer, and broader, with every year that passes. ▶

10
LittleBigPlanet 3

Publisher SCE **Developer** Sumo Digital
Format PS3, PS4

LittleBigPlanet's an unusual ambassador for videogames. Visually appealing and bang on trend with its homespun crafty looks, and featuring the comforting enunciations of Stephen Fry, it makes perfect sense as a gaming morsel capable of tempting to the fold those who might not yet have considered a PlayStation. But nestling in the shadows created by the celebrity-endorsed glare of its charming adventure is a dizzyingly powerful set of editing tools capable of making individual levels, mini-adventures or entire games.

There's always been a little friction between the series' two halves, but Sumo has pulled off the unlikely trick of bridging the gap better than Media Molecule ever managed to. There's still a lot to learn, sure, but even the most whimsically minded player should find the Popit Academy an appealing distraction, and that, as Fry might well say, is something really quite special.

9
This War Of Mine

Publisher/developer 11 Bit Studios
Format PC, iOS

A lot of games conceal a serious message about contemporary issues, but few make their point convincingly without compromising play in the process. 11 Bit Studios builds its harrowing theme into everything you do, implicating the player in every tragedy and every act of selflessness. Building your base is fun, but fail to build enough heaters by the time winter hits and your party will suffer terribly as a result. Exploring buildings in search of supplies is also enjoyable, but you'll have to deal with the guilt if a later return reveals its occupants have died as a result of your kleptomania.

But for all its cleverly implemented mechanics, it is *This War Of Mine*'s subversion of a hoary gaming tradition that most enthralls: your decisions don't fill or deplete a morality meter, and your actions aren't judged (outside of characters' internal monologues). You just have to survive, and how you achieve that end is entirely up to you.

8
Far Cry 4

Publisher/developer Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One

Be honest: you were expecting *Far Cry 3.5*, right? An expansion pack to Jason Brody's adventures with a new protagonist and the Pacific setting swapped for a Himalayan one. Sure, *Far Cry 4* hits the same beats as its predecessor – conquering outposts, hunting wildlife and butting heads with local psychopaths – but Ubisoft Montreal stitches it all together with a coherence that *Far Cry 3* lacked.

What is most remarkable about it is that it's the product of a company whose typical approach to open worlds is to fill them to bursting with busywork. *Far Cry 4* doesn't lack for distractions, but they are placed to tantalise: there's always something worth doing nearby, but it's never overwhelming. The studio celebrates the player, too, with a varied, satisfying weaponset, plenty of traversal options, and missions made to be flexible. It's an intoxicating blend that few were expecting to deliver so much.

7
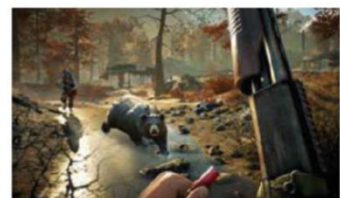
Ultra Street Fighter IV

Publisher Capcom **Developer** In-house/Dimps
Format 360, PC, PS3

It may be all the rage these days, but Capcom's an old hand at the art of the annual upgrade, and *Ultra*'s finely crafted solutions to *SFIV*'s longrunning problems make this the publisher's best incremental tart-up to date. Red Focus may have proven to be more useful in combos than as an escape tool, but the new Delayed Wakeup mechanic has helped make high-level play unpredictable again. Combined with a smartly considered rebalancing effort, it's sent some of *Arcade Edition*'s most frequent wearying sights – Akuma, Cammy, Seth et al – down from the top of the tier list. That list's been further shaken up by five thoroughly excellent additions to the already packed cast, all of whom continue to feature prominently on the tournament scene. *Ultra* is the best version of the best fighting game there's ever been, refining what came before and adding more than enough to keep us ticking over until the inevitable *Street Fighter V*.

6

Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes

Publisher Konami **Developer** Kojima Productions
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One

Hideo Kojima is one of gaming's great eccentrics, but Japan's auteur-in-chief spent 2014 experimenting instead of self-indulging, testing the market instead of doing his own thing. *Silent Hills* demo *PT* was a marketing coup, but *Ground Zeroes* was his masterpiece: both are exercises in maximising minimalism, and both are designed to whet the appetite for more fleshed-out games to follow. Yet *Silent Hills* will surely take vastly different form to *PT*. *Ground Zeroes* was a showcase not of ambitions, but of systems.

So you can complete it in ten minutes. So what? To do so is to waste an immaculately designed space of tremendous intricacy that is hugely replayable and uncommonly flexible. Ultimately *Ground Zeroes* is as much of a game as you want it to be, rather than the one its creator insists it must be. From Kojima, that's remarkable; for us, the wait for *MGSV: The Phantom Pain* has become intolerable.

5
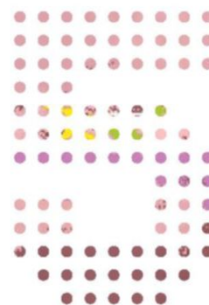
Nidhogg

Publisher/developer Messhof
Format PC, PS4, Vita

The beats pound and so does our heart, even as our eyes water and throb. We will not be the first to blink. A flash of white, and then another and another. Suddenly, the tension is replaced by elation as a neon fencer slumps before our unblemished white blade and the 'Go' arrow hops to our side of the screen. The whole exchange took maybe two seconds, but our hindbrain wastes no time in obeying the imperative. We run.

Nidhogg does with simplicity in two-second bursts what other games fail to achieve with complexity in hours, dissolving away the screen that separates game world from reality, conscious thought from reflex, ludic systems from raw emotional responses. It is resolutely a game for two players in the same room, a renaissance for local multiplayer. To play it with a friend is to be consumed by it – a wonderful parallel to the beast that awaits the victor of every match.

Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft

Publisher/developer Activision Blizzard
(Blizzard Entertainment) **Format** iOS, PC

Mario Kart 8

Publisher/developer Nintendo (EAD)
Format Wii U

Dark Souls II

Publisher Bandai Namco
Developer FromSoftware **Format** 360, PC, PS3

Hearthstone's great success isn't the millions of users gathered, the imitators spawned, or the coins tumbling into Activision's coffers, but its unbinding of the collectible card game from tabletop esoterica to become an all-embracing, life-consuming digital pursuit. Few could pull off such a transmogrification, but Blizzard's deft touch is evident in the tactility it imbues in incorporeal cards, in streamlined mechanics with fathoms of depth, and in the delicate interleaving of a multitude of powers.

Every CCG represents a perilous balancing act – one overpowered card can suck choice and strategy from the game – but Blizzard's post-launch support has kept the embers stoked for the duration of 2014, with judicious checks to too-dominant meta trends and a broadening of the game via the *Naxxramas* expansion. Yet *Hearthstone* is more than a paragon of gamecraft, it is a work that inspires devotion in unlikely places. Sheer magic.

It's been a long time since the launch of a *Mario Kart* has truly felt like an event. Sure, *MK7* was great, but its handheld exclusivity subdued the buzz around it, at least in the west. *MK8* was in danger of suffering a similar fate given its host platform's struggles, but despite Wii U's prospects, EAD has produced a game worth shouting about.

Those gorgeous visuals mark the series' exploration of HD for the first time – a superficial upgrade, perhaps, but one of particular note given Nintendo's swing to luddism in recent years. And behind all that fresh paint, *MK8* builds on the many excellent ideas put forward by its 3DS predecessor while taking some brave steps forward of its own, the most pronounced of which is a meaty handling model that, together with a power-up capable of destroying Spiny Shells, makes racing feel a great deal more about skill than it does luck – for the most part, at least.

Comparisons to its predecessor may be unflattering, but there's no shame in not quite living up to one of the finest games ever. Being able to warp between bonfires from the get-go may have meant *Dark Souls II* lacked the remarkable sense of place of Lordran, but untethering From's design team from logic let it deliver a world of dizzying variety, taking in the shimmering Shrine Of Amana, the majestic Iron Keep, and the giddying Dragon Aerie.

For all that it changed, this game repeated *Dark Souls*' greatest trick: offering enough variety to power a dozen playthroughs, new builds and strategies offered up by a deeply engaged community. The covenant system abandoned the critical path and let you hunt down sinners, set fatal traps, or invoke the spirit of Solaire with some jolly co-operation. Then came the best DLC of the year in the Lost Crowns trilogy, a punishing, almost perfect expansion to another epic.
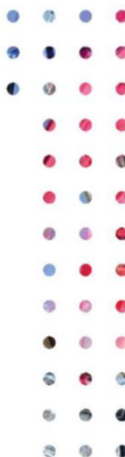
B a y o n e t t a   2

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** PlatinumGames **Format** Wii U

We may never know just how deep into development *Bayonetta 2* was before Sega cancelled it, though it must have been pretty far along given that the publisher was getting ready for the preview circuit before higher-ups announced the change in strategy that consigned it, and much more of Sega's riskier fare, to the bin. What is certain is that Nintendo helped Platinum deliver a game that would otherwise never have been released, and in the process turned a good year for the platform holder into a great one, its most valuable partner giving Wii U its best game to date. It was once unthinkable that the greatest game on a Nintendo system should have been made outside the company's own walls, but here we are. *Bayonetta 2* is brilliant.

Dozens of hours of play later, what sticks most in the mind is how confident it is. This is a game in a niche genre, made for a struggling system by a work-for-hire studio in a country whose dominance of the industry is long gone, yet to play it is to be overcome by how comfortable it is in its own skin. Much of that comes from Bayonetta herself, impossibly cocksure, unfazed by skyscraper-sized demons, brimstone-flinging angels or the lingering gaze of Platinum's camera. But it comes from the studio too. The two *Bayonetta*s launched almost five years apart; Platinum has spent the intervening years experimenting in the unfamiliar with mixed results, but here it went back to doing what it knows, and does, better than any developer on the planet.

The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter

Publisher/developer The Astronauts **Format** PC

The technicalities of photogrammetry may be dry, but the results are undeniable when you wander around the gently swaying, sunlight-dappled forests of *Ethan Carter*. There's no texture tiling or repeating stock models here, every surface instead unique and beautifully weathered. Yes, there's a mystery to be solved, but it's easy to get absorbed by every little detail, not just the clues.

Alien: Isolation

Publisher Sega **Developer** The Creative Assembly **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One

The screech of venting steam, the clacking diagnostic equipment – every sound in *Isolation* is there to elicit an emotion, be it nostalgia or paralysing fear. Musical cues from the film were also rerecorded with a full orchestra (including some of the musicians who worked on the original soundtrack), and the excellence extends even to the unnerving bleep pulsing from your motion tracker.

2 Alien: Isolation

Publisher Sega
Developer The Creative Assembly
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One

Creative Assembly's reverence for *Isolation*'s heritage is matched only by its ability to create architecture every bit as atmospheric as Ridley Scott's film. Spaces are so ominous and utilitarian that you'll feel like you've stepped onto the set, but perhaps even more surprising is that CA created a cross-gen game unhindered by its lesser versions.

3 Assassin's Creed Unity

Publisher/developer Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

In PS4 and Xbox One, Ubisoft Montreal's teeming armies of artists were given new canvases on which to unload their skills, and the results matched up to our high hopes. From toiling streetside craftsmen to elaborately rendered alabaster, *Unity* is crammed from floorboards to rooftops with a rare, entrancing attention to detail.

2 Mario Kart 8

Publisher/developer Nintendo (EAD)
Format Wii U

Nintendo's recent preference for fully orchestral soundtracks has all but erased the painful memories of *New Super Mario Bros U*'s cloying chirpiness. *Mario Kart 8*'s music is at its best in the remakes of old tracks, however, with the powerful nostalgia of an orchestral Rainbow Road or Mute City undimmed after countless hours of time trials.

3 DriveClub

Publisher SCE
Developer Evolution
Format PS4

Most games get engine sounds horribly wrong. Cars tend to sound like weak lawnmowers or brutish diesel tractors, but Evolution was fastidious in every aspect of its reproduction, even capturing the throaty, sinuous notes of a V12. Its reproductions are so good, in fact, that some brands have replaced their archive recordings with them.

PUBLISHER OF THE YEAR

Nintendo

Nintendo rarely has a bad year, but given the context of the task at hand, this was one of the company's best. With Wii U struggling, 2014 saw the company refocus attention on its core audience, saving *Bayonetta 2* from the cutting-room floor, making the best *Mario Kart* to date, and giving *Smash Bros* a brilliant new lease of life on two platforms. The year ahead looks even better. For all its problems, Nintendo remains the best in the business.

STUDIO OF THE YEAR

PlatinumGames

While Japan's loudest critic offered up a dismal action game and a crowdfunded *Mega Man* clone, Platinum spent 2014 showing Keiji Inafune that if you do one thing better than anyone else, and keep doing it, then success will come. *The Legend Of Korra* may have been a work-for-hire bust, but *Bayonetta 2* was staggering, and *Scalebound* was, for many, the star of Microsoft's E3 stage. Platinum, after a few difficult years, is back on top.

2 Activision Blizzard

Often fairly criticised as being too stuck in its ways, 2014 saw Activision Blizzard finally break free of its comfort zone. It bankrolled Sledgehammer's abandonment of *COD*'s modern warfare obsession, Bungie's MMOFPS experiment *Destiny*, and Blizzard's accessible CCG *Hearthstone*. Here's hoping this newfound love of risky business continues into 2015 and beyond.

3 Microsoft Studios

Phil Spencer becoming head of the Xbox division has done wonders for Microsoft's once-tattered image, but his work leading Microsoft Studios was every bit as vital in Xbox One's 2014 turnaround. *Sunset Overdrive*, *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* and *Forza Horizon 2* helped recast their host console as a machine for the players, not just the shareholders.

2 FromSoftware

Hidetaka Miyazaki's absence from the *Souls* director's chair may have furrowed some brows, but even so FromSoftware managed to deliver the brilliant *Dark Souls II*, then made it even better with some fantastic DLC. Miyazaki, now From's president, has been heading up E3-stealing PS4 exclusive *Bloodborne*, suggesting this fine run of form will continue into 2015.

3 Blizzard Entertainment

Blizzard will remember 2014 as the year in which it proved for good that it is no mere PC MMOG company. *Hearthstone* showed its understanding of mobile F2P; the console releases of *Diablo III Ultimate Edition* proved it knows what sofa players want, too. Next up is the FPS, with the MOBA-influenced *Overwatch*. Few would bet against the studio succeeding.

THE ALTERNATIVE EDGE AWARDS 2014

BEST SCARE TACTICS

PT

Publisher Konami **Developer** Kojima Productions
Format PS4

Hideo Kojima and Guillermo Del Toro may have crafted the most terrifying pair of corridors in videogame history, but *PT*'s greatest achievement is its marketing. Announced out of the blue at Gamescom and released for free there and then, it was the best possible way of revealing a new *Silent Hill* game, and the smartest announcement by far of a year dominated by CG-heavy teasers.

FALSEST START

DriveClub

Publisher SCE **Developer** Evolution
Format PS4

While *The Master Chief Collection* ran it close by simultaneously breaking four games in one handy package, not even that can be considered more of a failure than *DriveClub*. Arriving onto shelves 11 months late without its promised dynamic weather and with barely a single one of its headline online or social features working is some achievement, a record we hope remains unbroken for years.

WORST SIGNPOSTING

Dark Souls II

Publisher Bandai Namco/FromSoftware
Developer FromSoftware **Format** 360, PC, PS3

We spent the best part of a day falling to Mytha, The Baneful Queen, boss of Earthen Peak. Only later would we learn that burning down a windmill by interacting with a specific point with a torch in hand would drain the poison pool that had made the fight such a chore. Obtuseness is central to the *Souls* games' appeal, of course, but sometimes a little guiding hand wouldn't go amiss.

MOST GLARING ERROR

DriveClub

Publisher SCE **Developer** Evolution
Format PS4

DriveClub may have failed tragically as an online pursuit, but there's still plenty to admire, not least Evolution's painstaking work on those car interiors. Yet as we round another hairpin bend into the blinding glare of the Scottish sun, we wonder: was the fabric weave on a driver-side sun visor just one rendering job too far? Maybe when the clouds finally gather, it will make more sense. Maybe.

MESSIEST SIDEKICK

The Evil Within

Publisher Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Tango
Gameworks **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One

The Evil Within's melee weapons don't last for long in the hands of protagonist Sebastian Castellanos, but such laws don't apply to affable colleague Joseph Oda. Chapter Five in particular proves the latter so alarmingly capable with an axe that his entire top half is almost permanently covered in the blood-soaked entrails of his unfortunate victims. We'd hate to see his dry-cleaning bill.

WORST VERSE

Child Of Light

Publisher/developer Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Vita, Wii U, Xbox One

A winsome adventure with a painterly aesthetic, *Child Of Light* was bogged down by the clutter of its publisher's signature systems. But they weren't as problematic as its twee script, conducted entirely in not-quite-rhyming couplets to make even Noel Gallagher wince. Worse, it prompted a spate of indulgent reviews in which critics proved equally incapable of understanding scansion.

BEST
NEW GUN

Titanfall

Publisher EA **Developer** Respawn Entertainment
Format 360, Xbox One

Bored of 'realistic' game guns, 2014 saw the sci-fi weapons locker reopen. *Destiny*'s zingy fusion rifles deserve a mention, as does *Advanced Warfare*'s Tac-19 energy shotgun. The honour goes to *Titanfall*'s Smart Pistol, which doesn't take the crown so much as blow it up by autolocking onto its every jewel. For all the fuss over Titans, Respawn's best trick was turning the humble sidearm into a great primary.

PRETTIEST
FACES

Call Of Duty:
Advanced Warfare

Publisher Activision **Developer** Sledgehammer
Games **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One

A new *Call Of Duty* is perhaps the last game we'd expect to set a new standard, but *Advanced Warfare* raised the bar for performance capture with its remarkable prerendered cutscenes. Kevin Spacey's crinkled, pock-marked fizzog as evil CEO Jonathan Irons was a highlight, but special mention goes to Troy Baker as protagonist Jack Mitchell. Turns out gaming's busiest voice actor is one of its best-looking, too.

MOST THROWN
SHAPES

Destiny

Publisher Activision Blizzard **Developer** Bungie
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One

At first, we felt *Destiny*'s meagre emote set – dance, wave, point and sit down – wasn't enough. In fact, it's all we'll ever need. We wave at passers-by, point at loot chests, and sit down for screenshots. For everything else, there's the dance. We bust moves to celebrate, commiserate, say thanks and admit mistakes. It's the warmest, most regular interaction in the friendliest online game of the year.

MOST POINTLESS
UNLOCKABLE

Yaiba: Ninja
Gaiden Z

Publisher Koei Tecmo **Developer** Team Ninja,
Spark Unlimited **Format** 360, PC, PS3

There was little about Keiji Inafune's abysmal zombie slasher that wasn't offensive, but its skill tree might as well have flipped you the bird, holding a screenful of pointless upgrades for 2014's most detestable protagonist. The biggest offender asked for a skill point in exchange for making already mindlessly simple QTEs even easier, adding insult to injury in the worst game of the year.

WORST STEALTH
SECTIONS

Castlevania: Lords
Of Shadow 2

Publisher Konami **Developer** MercurySteam
Format 360, PC, PS3

We understand sequels are difficult, as developers strike a balance between the need to expand on what came before and retaining appeal. But the last thing *Lords Of Shadow* was missing was stealth, and its sequel's implementation was dismal. Scurrying around tunnels as a rat was bad enough, but the clunky, instafail section in Agreus's garden was simply pad-snappingly infuriating.

BEST
REMASTER

Grand Theft Auto V

Publisher/developer Rockstar
Format PS4, Xbox One

Another crowded field, with many publishers filling out release schedules with loving retexturing. *Tomb Raider* was an early highlight, and *The Last Of Us* is now the best exclusive on PS3 and PS4. But *GTAV* is remarkable, its world busier, better-looking and, in firstperson, more immersive than ever, its world-beating radio soundtrack further expanded. So, Rockstar, how about *Red Dead* next?

YOUR MOMENTS OF THE GENERATION

PS3 title *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars*, from Psyonix

When we picked our games of the generation in issue 272, we invited you to share your moments from the same era. Here, as promised, is a selection of your contributions, encapsulating an obsessive orb hunt, a dose of *Call Of Duty* rage, and a leap into the unknown.

I loved *Crackdown*, one of my favourite games on 360. Completed it a couple months after release, found all the 300 secret orbs relatively easily. Spent hours searching for the agility orbs, got to 499. Spent hours scouring Pacific City for the final orb, couldn't find it, drove me mad. Fast-forward three years: *Crackdown 2* came out, but it felt wrong to play until I found that 500th agility orb, so I loaded up the original again.

Cue more hours searching. Then, running over a roof in La Mugre, past somewhere I had been hundreds of times, I heard the agility orb noise – it was there, just below me. I couldn't believe it – I swear I'd run past that spot time and again, but had always missed it.

Free Runner achievement earned, I called my older brother, who also loved *Crackdown*, to tell him about it, as I was pretty sure my wife wouldn't understand what I was so happy/relieved about.
Simon Downham

Autoball. Or more correctly and poetically: *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars*. Or most commonly: *SARPBC*. It was there from the beginning. Not from my beginnings as a PC gamer more than 30 years ago, but from when I first discovered consoles. That first night after I unboxed my shiny new PS3, a friend came over to celebrate the occasion with some splitscreen-trial-versions-of-whatever-is-out-there action. When you included "cars" as a search criterion, you found yourself

downloading the tiny trial version of *SARPBC* pretty instantly. And there it was: like soccer in an enclosed gym, only that instead of athletes your team consists of one-to-four little RC cars, dwarfed by a gigantic ball that you were supposed to drive into the opponent's goal. And there the ball exploded! The gameplay was so straightforward, the controls so concise, the physics so relatable, the graphics so crisp… We fell in love with it straight away! We played the whole night, and within days my buddy got a PS3 himself. And then we went online…

In all my life there is not one game, or even game series, with which I've spent remotely as much time. And I wouldn't want to miss a moment! After a few particularly good matches two months ago, I got a message from one of the Big Players, saying, "You're almost there", and I smiled. These days the pressure is mostly gone, my gnarled hands release their clutch on the controller, and it is still as much, if not more, fun as on the first night, our *Autoball*.
Tobias Nowak

A pair of glances – those of Ellie and Riley after the photo booth breaks down in *The Last Of Us* DLC. Never in games have I seen characters express emotions with such subtlety as achieved there. After the moment passed I paused the game, closed my eyes, tilted my head back, and revelled in the skill of Naughty Dog's animators. Previously, only the best film directors were able to evoke such a response from me, but Naughty Dog had once again raised the bar.
Benjamin Thompson

I remember the first time I had a moment with *Call Of Duty*. The annoyance, the rage that filled me at being killed for the umpteenth time, overwhelmed me. After all, I was clearly the best player in the world at

the time and therefore nothing should be dominating me so efficiently. I couldn't shout because the neighbours would hear and remind me of the unspoken noise agreement shared between friendly neighbours, but no one was in the room so I charged my throwing arm and raised my 360 controller above my head. I leapt out of my seat, took aim at the empty floor in front of me, and threw it as hard as I could on the laminated flooring that had only been laid two weeks previously. Rather than solving all my problems, awarding me with the revenge I sought on the evil that had overtaken my prowess and skill, the controller bounced right back and hit me squarely in the forehead.

I blinked, frozen in my post-throwing stance, sat down, and thought about my actions. After a long think, I changed my gamertag to something that would remind me to stay cool, stay calm and would convey my message to those around me. And since that fateful day, I haven't thrown a tantrum, controller or any sort of object in disgust at a game ever since. And my gamertag hasn't changed either.
Max Boulton

Super Mario Galaxy completely subverted the 3D platforming genre and is an absolute delight from start to finish. There isn't a weak moment in the game: the levels are intricate, the soundtrack is fantastic, and the graphics are phenomenal, even now in the HD era. True, it didn't have a real story, but it was about the story you forged with it, demonstrating that gameplay trumps all in videogames. I love how the game started in the Mushroom Kingdom and then jettisoned into space when Bowser kidnaps Peach for the umpteenth time. Once I was in space I realised I had no idea what to expect, and couldn't wait to jump into the unknown.
Francis Jackson

PLAYSTATION®4 GAMES
CALENDAR 2014-15

YOUR GUIDE TO WHAT'S ON PS4.

NOVEMBER

OUT NOW

LittleBIG Planet 3

NOV **OUT NOW** CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE	NOV **OUT NOW** GRAND THEFT AUTO V
NOV **OUT NOW** PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2015	NOV **OUT NOW** DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION
NOV **OUT NOW** LEGO BATMAN 3: BEYOND GOTHAM	NOV **OUT NOW** WWE 2K15
NOV **OUT NOW** ASSASSIN'S CREED: UNITY	NOV **OUT NOW** LITTLEBIGPLANET 3
NOV **OUT NOW** FAR CRY 4	

DECEMBER

DEC **OUT NOW** THE CREW	DEC **OUT NOW** DESTINY EXPANSION I: THE DARK BELOW DLC

COMING IN 2015

MAR 27

Bloodborne

JAN 23	SAINTS ROW IV RE-ELECTED & GAT OUT OF HELL	APR 14	MORTAL COMBAT X
JAN 30	DYING LIGHT	JUN 2	BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT
FEB 10	EVOLVE	2015 TBA	UNTIL DAWN
FEB 20	THE ORDER 1886	2015 TBA	METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN
FEB 24	THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT	2015 TBA	DEAD ISLAND 2
MAR 20	PROJECT CARS	2015 TBA	RESIDENT EVIL REMASTERED
MAR 20	BATTLEFIELD: HARDLINE	2015 TBA	PGA TOUR
MAR 20	FINAL FANTASY TYPE 0	2015 TBA	TEARAWAY: UNFOLDED
MAR 27	BLOODBORNE	2015 TBA	UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
APR 3	DARK SOULS II: SCHOLAR OF THE FIRST SIN		

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PS4

FINE PRINT

Gaming books have proliferated since our original roundup way back in **E**157, covering every facet of game design, science and culture, and a few deserve to be on every player's reading list. Here's our guide to filling out your library

BY MARK GREEN

ESSENTIALS

These are the volumes you should have read already

04 — Trigger Happy (Steven Poole)

02 — Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World — Jane McGonigal

01 — chris crawford on game design

03 — MASTERS OF DOOM: HOW TWO GUYS CREATED AN EMPIRE AND TRANSFORMED POP CULTURE — DAVID KUSHNER

05 — GAME OVER: PRESS START TO CONTINUE

06 — Designing Virtual Worlds

07 — A Theory of Fun for Game Design — Raph Koster

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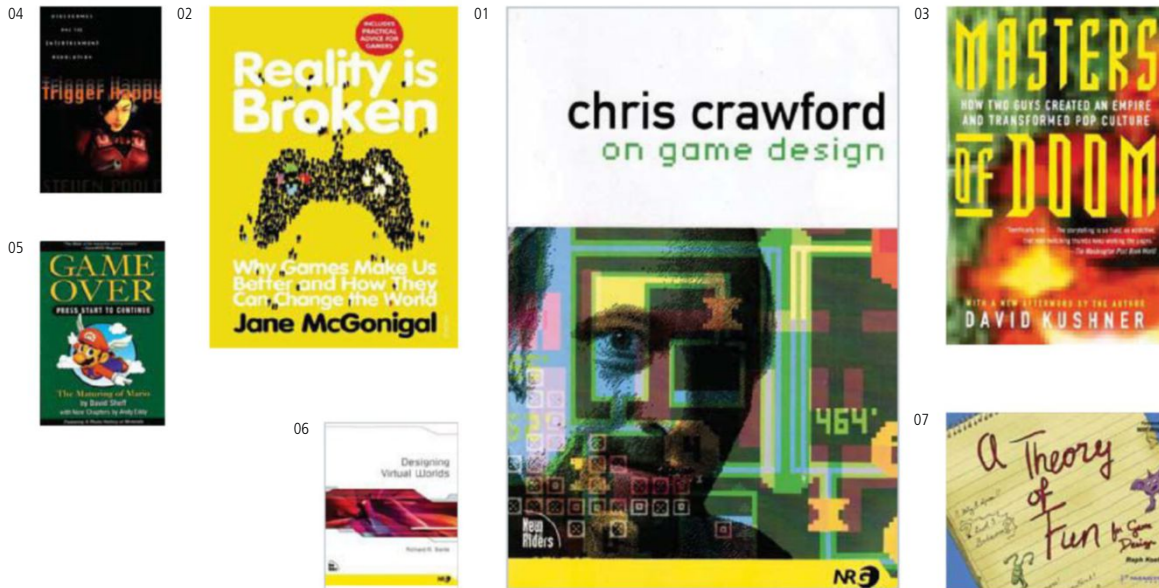
01 Chris Crawford On Game Design
Chris Crawford
Even the endorsement on the back cover admits "I don't always agree with Chris". Impassioned and controversial – but always illuminating.

02 Reality Is Broken
Jane McGonigal
A thumpingly argued manifesto for game mechanics as a force for good. Despite gamification's decline, this still has relevance.

03 Masters Of Doom
David Kushner
An engrossingly dramatic personality-led account of the brilliance and bedlam at the offices of id and Ion Storm up to 2001.

04 Trigger Happy
Steven Poole
Edge columnist Poole delivered the first truly accessible, intelligently written and celebratory account of the reasons we play.

05 Game Over
David Sheff
Read any book about Nintendo, and you can bet it cribs heavily from this unrivalled dig into the pre-16bit years.

06 Designing Virtual Worlds
Richard Bartle
MMOGs from the perspective of the genre's dad: Bartle co-created *MUD*. Admirably weighty, practical and inspirational.

07 A Theory Of Fun For Game Design
Raph Koster
A compact and playful plea to developers crafting player-matched challenges, told through text and childlike cartoons.

08 The Art Of Game Design: A Book Of Lenses
Jesse Schell
Students of game design shouldn't miss this one-element-at-a-time approach to bringing the best out of a game.

09 Beyond Barbie And Mortal Kombat
Yasmin B Kafai and others
Update on a seminal 2000 essay collection. Edifying on what's changed in gaming's gender attitudes since – and what hasn't.

10 Cybertext: Perspectives On Ergodic Literature
Espen J Aarseth
Aarseth is a lordly figure from game studies' first wave. This introduced "ergodic texts", stories that demand reader action.

11 Flow
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
The original theory of why we get 'in the zone' in games. A verbose but groundbreaking work. (It's "Cheek-sent-me-high-e", by the way.)

12 Hamlet On The Holodeck
Janet Murray
Important early exploration of 'reader' vs narrative in the digital age. Still referenced all the time, everywhere.

13 Homo Ludens
Johan Huizinga
A 1938 exploration of how play permeates culture. Huizinga's "magic circle" – the place for play – is big in game studies.

14 Man, Play And Games
Roger Caillois
This 1961 masterwork from a French sociologist builds on Huizinga. The field of game studies has nurtured its model of four game types.

15 The Medium Of The Video Game
Mark JP Wolf
This influential collection prods at the heart of games: space, time, narrative and genre.

16 The Ultimate History Video Games
Steven L Kent
US-centric and Atari-heavy, but glimmering with anecdotal jewels from everyone who's ever been anyone in gaming, and weighing in at a satisfying 608 pages. ▶

CULTURE AND MEMOIR

Digging into studios, games and the people who make them

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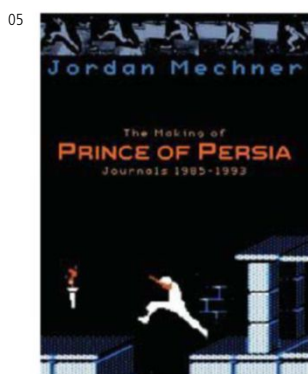
01 Boss Fight Books
Michael Kimball, Darius Kazemi and others
Each of these compact odes to single games is intensely personal, and your own taste will determine which you love and which you'd rather fling across the room. Michael P Williams' take on *Chrono Trigger* is boyishly enthusiastic; *ZZT* sees author Anna Anthropy embrace the game's diverse community of level creators and modders as well as heartfelt themes of identity and acceptance; *Super Mario Bros 2* finds treasure in the nooks of the game's strange history. *Galaga*, *Jagged Alliance 2* and perennial nostalgia magnet *Earthbound* complete the set, while Season 2 has made well over 800 per cent of its Kickstarter goal.

02 Killing Is Harmless
Brendan Keogh
We need more books like this. Whether the satire of *Spec Ops: The Line* opened your eyes or had them rolling, it's fascinating to team up with Keogh for this critical walkthrough.

He overreaches in the search for significance: like the game's mind-addled Captain Walker, he often sees things that aren't there. But he's captivating on how the game upended his views on game violence and player agency – there's something genuinely chilling in his analysis that enemies fear the player's ability, not the character's, and that by the end Walker is "stretching back, out of the TV, and groping for the player's mind".

03 Jacked
David Kushner
It's gripping, but Jacked is the story of Rockstar, not *GTA* – Kushner is seduced by the antics of Sam Houser and "one hundred people [who] felt like they were in The Beatles", while the coders of *GTAIII* onwards largely remain as elusive as the mythical San Andreas yeti. Rockstar is painted as a beguiling tumult of genius, luck, hustle and madness (at one point, Gary Coleman becomes a "fulcrum of understanding" for *Vice City*). But the surprise scene stealer is cutscene director Navid Khonsari, drily babysitting bemused

Hollywood guest stars and nailing an electrifying motion-capture session for *GTAIII*'s carjacking animation.

04 Minecraft
Daniel Goldberg and Linus Larsson
Despite digging all the way down to Markus Persson's troubled family history and Nordic gaming's demoscene origins, this book still can't quite fully explain the rise of the unassuming game that Goldberg and Larsson say "embraces the pixel". Still, it's a brisk, endearingly warm telling of Notch's journey, and by the end it's surprisingly clear that the future promise of *Scrolls*, not the explosive success of *Minecraft*, truly drove Mojang. The world should ultimately give thanks that Mrs Persson didn't manage to tempt a youthful Notch away from his computer by planting football posters on his bedroom walls.

05 The Making Of Prince of Persia
Jordan Mechner
"How did I do it for *Karateka*? I can't remember. I'm not sure I can do it

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again." Twenty-five years after *Prince Of Persia*'s launch, these intensely intimate – and bravely uncensored – journals are a vital time capsule, with a bright, eloquent and cultured young Mechner enduring the game's protracted four years of development. He's constantly distracted by Hollywood screenwriting, tormented by self-doubt and frustrated by publishers and marketers, but, ultimately, he's driven on by the "little shimmering beacon of life" he's created in the meticulously rotoscoped Prince.

06 Rise Of The Videogame Zinesters
Anna Anthropy
By the end of this energising manifesto, you'll be fired up with the drive to play games, create them and cheerlead for them all at the same time. Anthropy believes the game industry is an endlessly spinning wheel of the same old themes for the same old audiences, and she wants to poke a stick in the spokes. Half the book is Anthropy's love of games

(and a thought-provoking perspective on their history) poured into a call for readers of all stripes to get stuck into diversifying games; the other is a practical guide to doing it now that the entry barriers have crumbled.

07 The Art Of Failure
Jesper Juul
Games keep introducing us to new things we're bad at. Why is it we like them again? 'Ludologist' Juul briefly explores the paradox, and will jolt you into considering why you use boring strategies to avoid losing, or get turned off by too-easy games. As he drily notes, "We are not necessarily disappointed if we find it easy to learn to drive a car."

08 Clipping Through
Leigh Alexander
While ostensibly a GDC 2014 report, that's only half the story. This is a highly personal journal, a soul-baring tribute to the things and people Alexander loves. By turns it's sadly funny (the standout being her dread at seeing Ken Levine after

she publicly eviscerates *BioShock Infinite*) and movingly honest. Short, but very sweet.

09 The Culture Of Digital Fighting Games
Todd Harper
Arguably gaming's most vibrant and diverse community gets a year-long anthropological treatment. Harper shows *SFIV* and *Smash Bros* fans in two minds, apparently eager to swell ranks but quick to jump on newbies who do the equivalent of "going on a chess forum and complaining that the knight's moves are too confusing". And god forbid you ever choose Hilde in *Soul Calibur IV*.

10 Doom: Scarydarkfast
Dan Pinchbeck
Dear Esther designer Pinchbeck is at his best drawing parallels between *Doom*'s alpha and beta features and the behind-the-scenes wranglings at id (and at his worst when knee-deep in the deadly technical detail). His developer's eye and solid research make the well-worn story of *Doom*'s

innovation – "simple things executed brilliantly" – freshly appealing.

11 Going Nowhere
Sam Leith
In just 60 pages and six games, Leith evokes more of the magic and melancholy of gaming nostalgia than most other memoirs combined. Somehow, he uses *Super Sprint* and *Red Faction* to beautifully echo the milestones of growing up, and there's a sparkling turn of phrase on every page (*Elite*'s wireframe Cobra looks as though someone had "carved a spaceship from a giant diamond").

12 Unraveling Resident Evil
Nadine Farghaly (editor)
From a serious series of 'contributions to zombie studies', this brings academic brains to *Resi*'s games and films. Admittedly it's unlikely that *Resi* is really about US capitalism, pharmaceutical conspiracies, feminism, film noir and Freud all at once, but in its accessibility and range, this acts as a good entry-level introduction to game studies. ▶

HISTORY

The past is a foreign country; here are some guidebooks

01 Buttonless
Ryan Rigney

Short chapters on the making of 100 mobile games might sound superficial, but Rigney's interviews tell the human stories at the heart of these games, teasing out the love affairs, friendships, wars, new puppies and dying cats that shaped their creation. The mobile marketplace emerges as sublime chaos, where global lawsuits and five-year-old developers coexist, a single Apple guideline blip can crush dreams, and the author can claim straight-faced that the music for *Enviro-Bear 2000* was composed by "a hotel manager from Bali, Indonesia" and you can't be sure whether he's serious. A gem.

02 Grand Thieves & Tomb Raiders
Rebecca Levene and Magnus Anderson

There's room for both today's stalwarts and yesterday's forgotten pioneers in this riveting history, which makes clear how UK gaming's ups and downs have been shaped by its peculiar history: the BBC, Thatcherite enterprise, Oxbridge, class, Girl Power and Cool Britannia. The running theme is a nation bluffing its way to success, found in an early publisher whose office was secretly a phone box; Tim Wright creating *Wipeout*'s iconic music the morning after spending just one night in a club; and Acorn knocking out a chip design that today powers almost every mobile phone on the planet.

03 It's Behind You
Bob Pape

R-Type on the wheezing ZX Spectrum should have been impossible. Pape pulled it off magnificently, but the strength of this rough-and-ready free memoir isn't the technical story. It's made by Pape's gloriously deadpan humour as he flatly describes the alternate universe of '80s UK game development: sleeping at the office, showering at the local leisure centre, and tracing enemy patterns from his bed. At an Activision party gone wrong, Pape describes "the crêpe paper starting coming unstuck from the milk crate" – a phrase that perfectly sums up every turn of the very British farce unfolding around him.

04 Nintendo Magic
Osamu Inoue

If you've already devoured Game Over, this is the perfect dessert. Published in Japan in 2008 and built from rare interviews with Nintendo executives and insiders, it's often over-reverent, but it's also packed with insight, especially on the deep historic rivalry between internal teams that Iwata is keen to sweep away through collaborative 'Miyamotoism'. This is a company guided by spirits: Hiroshi Yamauchi's demand for innovation and Gunpei Yokoi's inventiveness clearly drive Miyamoto, who concepts the first DS on a stylus-controlled Pocket PC with masking tape across the middle.

05 Racing The Beam
Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost

The title refers to just one of the arcane skills needed to code wonders on Atari's VCS, a system technically designed to play *Pong*, *Tank* and little else. Through the lens of six games, this transports you back to sit alongside the early Atari devs whose day job was to give birth to the whole field of videogames, and help the world

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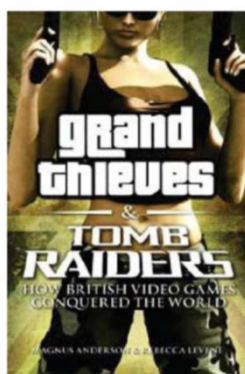
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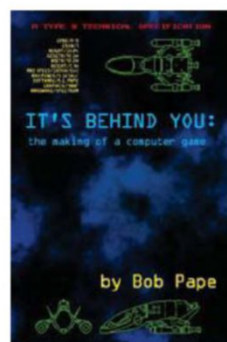
understand new concepts such as moving between rooms ("move 'off' the television screen…"). It's technical but expertly written; there's no better evocation of the 1983 US crash than ET "peering out at the industry like a death's head" on the infamous game's title screen.

06 Rogue Leaders
Rob Smith
Before Disney's buyout of its parent, LucasArts (in all its guises) survived three decades, far outliving Atari, which fathered the company through a $1 million cheque to George. It made *Monkey Island* and works based on a galaxy far, far away, of course, but Smith dusts off lost levels and concept art from many tantalising cancelled projects too. His book's a little rushed, and anecdotes – such as *Star Wars Episode I: Racer* being concepted by two dogs pulling a developer on rollerskates – are few. But Lucas pops in and out to insist on a fire button in *Rescue On Fractalus* or, bafflingly, to ban Wookiees from ever being a game lead.

07 Dungeons And Desktops
Matt Barton
This is such a weighty historical tome focused on US-style computer RPGs that it's divided into 'ages'. Barton injects his own opinion too often and is notably stronger on the most ancient games, but to his credit he adventures far beyond the well-trodden realms of the *Ultima*s and the *Diablo*s to explore the genre's cobwebbed corners, bringing unrivalled insight into the innovations of even the most obscure dungeon crawler.

08 Game Sound
Karen Collins
A likeable survey of everything from Noël Coward's thoughts on fruit-machine sounds to the composer of *Tomb Raider: Legends* dropping in the sound of an orchestra turning pages for added authenticity. Collins' work is too brief on rhythm-action games and innovations like the speaker built into Nintendo's Wii Remote, but it's filled with ear-opening examples. Read with YouTube to hand.

09 A Mind Forever Voyaging
Dylan Holmes
Holmes arguably picked the wrong games for his personal history of videogame narrative: the main text is mostly obvious choices (*Heavy Rain* is included, while *Metal Gear* features *twice*), while the brief appendix includes a far juicier and more eclectic selection (including the titular Infocom adventure game itself, dating from 1985). But it's lucidly written, with many references and footnotes to send you off to learn more.

10 Ocean: The History
Chris Wilkins and Roger M Kean
For '80s kids, Ocean tale was the story of *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* and big-name licences from the movie and coin-op world. The memories from p96 onwards of this well-researched book (co-author Kean co-founded Newsfield, home of Crash and Zzap!64) recount the true history: young developers in the 'dungeon' basement of Ocean's Manchester office, united in camaraderie, pranks, problem-solving and sheer love of games as they mine for the gold that would make their bosses rich.

11 Replay
Tristan Donovan
To cover a truly global history of games is quite the ambition, and as such, entire genres like stealth have to be cleared away in less than a page here. But Donovan really does manage to take in French literary games, the Russian videogame scene pre-*Tetris*, Korean PC bangs and much more without coming apart at the seams. Hugely impressive.

12 Stay Awhile And Listen
David L Craddock
Book one of a proposed trilogy on Blizzard. It's suspiciously one-sided – there's barely a whiff of conflict or disagreement in 200 pages, and laughable Atari Lynx platformer *Gordo 106* is fêted like some kind of Miyamoto masterpiece. But in key moments such as the birth of online *Warcraft* and a tense *Diablo* pitch meeting, Stay Awhile And Listen is thrillingly told. ▶

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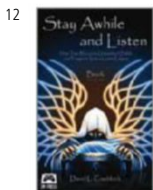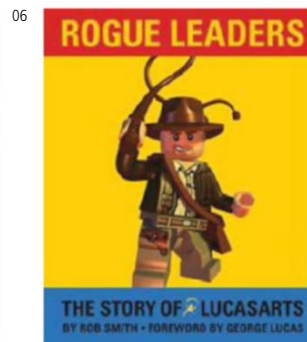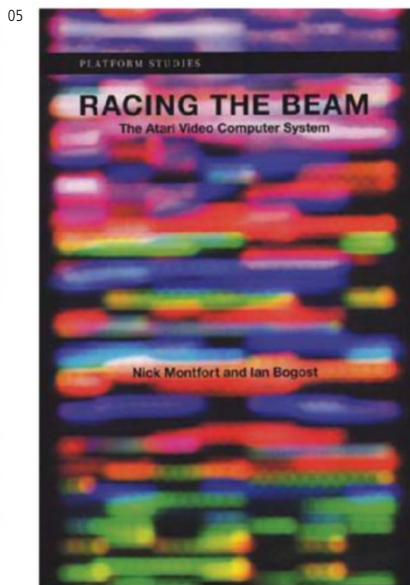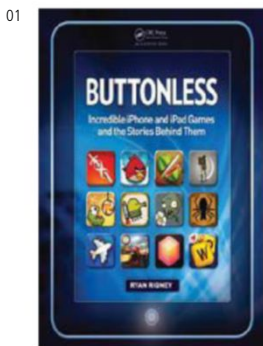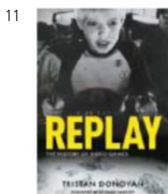
FICTION

Entertainment focused on our favourite type of entertainment
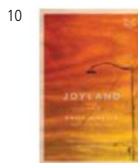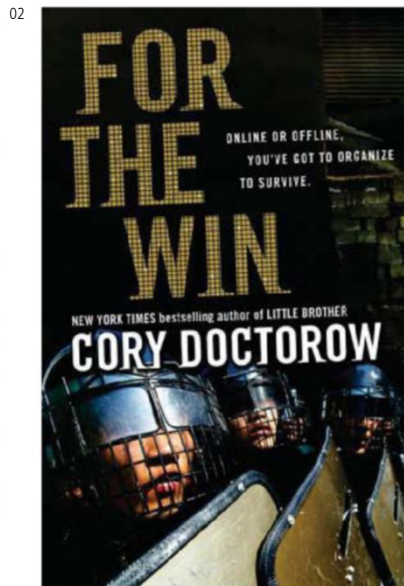
01 Constellation Games
Leonard Richardson

This is intelligent and sharply funny first-contact sci-fi in its own right, and yet the real draw is not the arrival of aliens on Earth, but that they come bringing 20,000 years of extraterrestrial games with them. The hero's capsule reviews of oddities like *Recapture That Remarkable Taste* are magically vivid, inventive and engaging, leaving you with a powerful longing to get your hands on the 'Brain Embryo' console that plays them. And human games benefit from Richardson's masterful writing too, most notably in a bemused alien's hilariously confused attempt to understand a virtual pony game.

02 For The Win
Cory Doctorow

If you're familiar with Doctorow, you won't be surprised by the techno-utopian thread running through this novel for teens. He imagines vast MMOGs (run by Coca-Cola, Mad Magazine and Nintendo) uniting exploited young gold farmers into a globe-spanning virtual union,

sparking real-world unrest. Yes, a character does at one point yell, "This isn't a game!" It's gripping, even as conversations between 14-year-olds jarringly become anticapitalist polemics, and the games themselves – including a tantalising mech MMOG that's half *Titanfall*, half Power Rangers – get left behind.

03 Ghost In The Machine
Lana Polansky and Brendan Keogh (editors)

A suitably haunting collection of short stories that give voice and emotion to the characters we control. There's fun in figuring out the game references – *Animal Crossing* is painted not so much as a wild world as a strangely sad one. And while not every tale is a success, Andrew Vanden Bossche's Good Losers Are Pretty will stay with you, dreamily imagining a Famicom addon that brings characters out of the cart and into real life, with the bittersweet idea of a Mario who leapt out into the world but then "jumped away into the mountains… and was never seen again".

04 Lucky Wander Boy
DB Weiss

It's almost a shame Weiss has his hands full with HBO's Game Of Thrones (he's the co-creator), because here he exhibited a rare talent for writing authentically about fictional videogames. The *Lucky Wander Boy* coin-op at the novel's heart is captivatingly eerie, its memory gradually unhinging protagonist Adam Pennyman (whose writeups of '80s games in his Catalogue Of Obsolete Entertainments are knowingly and hilariously overwrought). Weiss manages to invoke the dreamlike quality of half-remembered childhood gaming, and how our imagination fills the space beyond a game's visible world.

05 Ready Player One
Ernest Cline

This is what you'd get if you could capture in book form the gabbled fantasies of an '80s kid on a sugar rush. The Roald Dahl-esque plot, wherein a rich developer promises his fortune to the winner of a treasure hunt
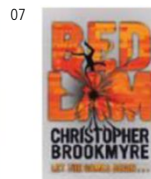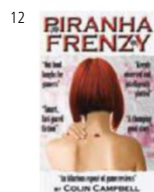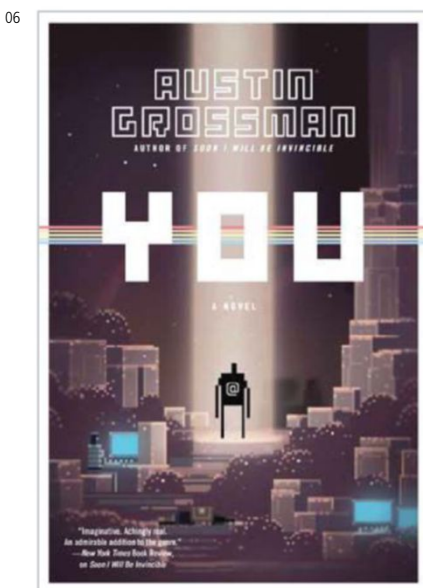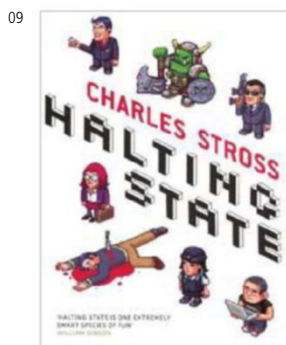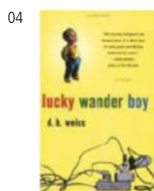
inside a *Second Life*-esque MMOG called *OASIS*, sends the young hero on quest through virtualised '80s culture where game knowledge handily conquers all. It's absurd – at one point, he's playing a game, playing Matthew Broderick in WarGames, playing *Galaga* – and the rules of *OASIS* become increasingly inconsistent as avatars wage war with a malevolent Internet service provider, but fun nonetheless.

06 You
Austin Grossman
You has a Capy-designed *Superbrothers* cover and is written by an author who helped create *System Shock*, but savvy readers might wince as games are described like a Star Trek holodeck, and save files from a 1983 Roguelike are effortlessly loaded into a 1997 space strategy game. It's worth sticking with, though: Grossman cleverly weaves industry history and developer lore into the tale of a game producer tracing a strange bug through his company's games –

a bug that manifests chillingly as a sentient NPC in one of the book's best bits. Take this advice, though: skip the dream sequences.

07 Bedlam
Christopher Brookmyre
Bedlam's better than your average purveyor of the trapped-in-a-game trope, because the protagonist is dragged around a gaming multiverse where '90s FPSes, *Jet Set Willy* and *Assassin's Creed* coexist. The jokes ease up halfway through, and then it barrels along nicely towards an unexpectedly affecting finish.

08 Coin Opera 2
Kirsten Irving and Jon Stone (editors)
Treasure this rare sighting of the lesser-spotted game poetry collection, not least for its playfulness: poems are written entirely in PlayStation symbols or blossom into *Peggle*'s colour scheme. The games and approaches are pleasingly varied – *Doomdark's Revenge* and *Samorost* sit alongside more mainstream

choices – and there's a fun experiment in 'twoplayer' poems.

09 Halting State
Charles Stross
In near-future Scotland, AR headsets and ARGs are everywhere, and MMOG economies are a magnet for real-life crime. More about virtual worlds than games, but absorbing if you can keep up with Stross's usual crush of jargon, and an exponentially ridiculous plot curve that goes from fantasy bank heist to global clandestine surveillance network in about 150 pages.

10 Joyland
Emily Schultz
A coming-of-age drama set in 1982: two Canadian siblings shed their innocence against the backdrop of the golden age of arcades. Schultz wanted to "mimic the movement and imagery of games", but in fact it's the deliberate, almost dreamlike detail that stands out. The games, though they come relatively rarely,

are described with a literariness and poignancy that lingers.

11 Mogworld
Ben Croshaw
Zero Punctuation's Croshaw mashes Terry Pratchett's dry wit with Douglas Adam's freewheeling chaos when an undead zombie discovers his world is all just a game. Mogworld's awash with sardonic nods to MMOG conventions, and Croshaw takes full advantage of the impermanence of game death to put his poor characters through a grimly funny series of slapstick ends.

12 Piranha Frenzy
Colin Campbell
Veteran game journalist Campbell has clearly built up a head of steam about his industry – this eviscerates the game media, while also satirising the ugly parts of every side of gaming in a way that foreshadowed many recent controversies. Between the fanboys, developers, marketers and media, no one comes out of this looking good. ▶

COFFEE TABLE

Not Kramerica Industries books about coffee tables

10

01

Every Day is Play.
A Celebration of the Video Game.

[?]

B1

05

PUSH > START

THE ART OF VIDEO GAMES

06

THE UNOFFICIAL GAME & WATCH COLLECTORS GUIDE

LIMITED EDITION

07

ANGRY BIRDS HATCHING A UNIVERSE

08

ALIEN ISOLATION

02

THE EYE OF BAYONETTA

09

Commodore 64

12

SUPER iam8bit

04

magical game time
by Zac Gorman

MGT

03

THE HOHOKUM ALMANAC

11

GAMESCENES

01 Every Day Is Play
Matthew Kenyon
Recommending a book that kicks off with covers from this very magazine feels oddly self-serving, but this is a wonder throughout: a 300-page kaleidoscope of game art in every medium and genre imaginable. There's no discernible order to most of it, but that encourages pauses to take in each artwork on its own terms, and makes turning the page to find a hand-painted plate, poem or digital water sculpture all the more surprising. The gaming community's love for its hobby pours from the pages, and is most sweetly evoked in wonky crayon Mario drawings from the author's own children.

02 The Eyes Of Bayonetta
Sega
Suitably revealing, barely a sketch or boxart pose is allowed to pass here without a frank, funny anecdote from PlatinumGames, as the team battles with "absurd higher-ups" to keep Bayonetta's glasses, Shimazaki bemoans the painstaking enemy detail that isn't visible in the final game, and Kamiya regularly pops in with demands like "I want a galactic clock!" and "I want pointy hats!" The impression is of supremely talented artists, who – despite some decisions in questionable taste – have a genuine investment in the character of their characters. (Book and DVD.)

03 The Hohokum Almanac
Richard Hogg and Nick Hurwitch
This kid-friendly travel guide to the technicolour 'Hohokosmos' of Sony's befuddling wonder doesn't make things any easier to comprehend – if anything it just makes things worse, as you struggle to work out why vermillion would cause people to "see the future". But the art is irresistible, and writer Hurwitch brings whimsical humour to the many little stories, songs, activities and foldout treats. The innocent

but wry charm calls to mind Adventure Time and Yo Gabba Gabba, and the little rainbow cloth bookmark is lovely, too.

04 Magical Game Time Vol 1
Zac Gorman
If your Twitter stream or Facebook feed has ever tugged at your heart with a wistful animated comic about Zelda or Earthbound, chances are it was Gorman's work. These enchanting comics and sketches lose a little in the GIF-to-paper freezing process, but the dialogue is still very much alive. With a few careful speech bubbles, Gorman brings emotion and weight to the most innocently simplistic '80s game plots, and will transport you right back to kneeling on the living-room carpet, controller or joystick in hand. And no one yet has better encapsulated the short, horrific life of a Battletoad on a jetbike.

05 Push Start: The Art Of Video Games
Stephan Guenzel
What you get here is 350 giant pages of pure in-game images. Pixel purists won't be pleased that careless emulator screenshotting has distorted some vintage sprites and scenery, and things get a bit jpeggy from 1996. Otherwise, it's a gorgeous gallery of both sensible and unconventional choices, all the way from 1952's OXO up to Halo 5. But why is this book so tall and wide and square? Because of the bonus at the back: a ten-inch vinyl record (and an MP3 download code for the rest of us). A nice touch, even if the pedestrian 8bit remixes mean it won't stay on many turntables for long.

06 The Unofficial Game & Watch Collector's Guide
Dave Gschmeidler and Gerhard Meyer
This is the definitive catalogue of Gunpei Yokoi's "lateral thinking with

withered technology", which saw cheap LCD calculator screens reimagined into pocket games that sold 43 million (and gave birth to the D-pad). The lascivious photos and detail on alternate versions and foreign quirks reflect the fevered passion of collectors who swarm on surviving Game & Watches – the book's price charts show that 1981's Egg is now verging on Fabergé Egg, fetching up to £1,000 in mint condition. It's also a fine companion to Before Mario, Erik Voskuil's new book collecting together pre-NES Nintendo toys.

07 Angry Birds: Hatching a Universe
Danny Graydon
Love or hate Rovio's feathered band, this is a delight. Ignore the text, which often feels like it's been borrowed from some insipid PowerPoint presentation for shareholders. Focus on how the size of the Angry Birds universe means this can race exhilaratingly through concept art, sketches and merchandise, and the care that's gone into the pullout stickers, postcards, posters and other tchotchkes tucked away in envelopes.

08 The Art Of Alien: Isolation
Andy McVittie
The "used future" aesthetic of Isolation's remarkable environments rightly squeezes out the perhaps overfamiliar xenomorph itself. Glimpses of abandoned characters, weapons and scenarios almost outnumber actual game art, and storyboards and concept sketches are drenched in atmosphere. Fittingly, there's an alien hiding under the dustcover, too. (Or a sketch of one, at least.)

09 Commodore 64: A Visual Commpendium
Sam Dye
The C64 library is still growing; you'll find recent remakes of Canabalt and

Super Hexagon among the 200-plus pages of screens and artwork here. The swathes of giant pixels are glossily hypnotic, making it easier to forgive the odd moment of sloppy editing and the strange obsession with the making of loading screens. An Amiga-based follow-up has already met its Kickstarter goal.

10 Dark Souls: Design Works
M Kirie Hayashi (translator)
Publisher Udon has a vast selection of art books, often translated from Japanese. This has a slighter pagecount than most and, suitably, offers few hints about the provenance of each image. But the ratio of artwork to text is rewarding, and the monster lineup should prove a stirring reminder of battles fought, won and lost (but mostly lost).

11 Gamescenes
Matteo Bittanti and Domenico Quaranta
A curated paper museum of art influenced by or created through videogames. The images are tiny, and much is less than convincing – Brody Condon's Fake Screenshot Contest is simply a litany of terrible Photoshop efforts – but there are gems, such as Alison Mealey's Unreal Tournament bot trails, and Aram Bartholl's playful glasses that superimpose an FPS gun onto your vision.

12 Super iam8bit
Jon M Gibson and others
A second volume of nostalgic game art from an occasional LA gallery exhibition. This is determinedly non-digital: almost all of these personal takes on '80s games are real paintings, sculptures or – in one case – felt moustaches. There's lots of work inspired by perennials such as Mario and Pac-Man, but, mystifyingly, it's Joust that seems to trigger artists' most frequent and harrowing flashbacks. ▶

GAME STUDIES

The deepest dives into what, how and why we play

01 Best Before

James Newman

Here's the cofounder of the National Videogame Archive titling a section of his book "Let Videogames Die". He hasn't lost his marbles: his ambition is that museums and galleries stop trying to bring us playability in perpetuity, and instead "document the game while it exists" – archiving forums, walkthroughs and speed runs to preserve why and how we've played. Newman is blistering on our obsolete obsession (case in point: Miyamoto wanted to remake *Ocarina Of Time* almost from the minute he'd finished working on it), and the neglect that's led to some virtual worlds disappearing forever.

02 Beyond Choices

Miguel Sicart

Sicart wants fewer of *BioShock*'s balanced choices, more of *Fallout 3*'s Tenpenny Tower: meaningful ethical dilemmas where brutal no-win decisions drag your own morality out into the open, leaving us "challenged, thrilled, shaken and illuminated". He's especially eloquent on how we've been trained to expect instant outcomes of our decisions – he's no fan of F9 quickloads. This is a follow-up to The Ethics Of Computer Games, but Sicart says this "won't be a trilogy" – a shame, because he no doubt has much to say about recent indie games that approach his ideal.

03 Game Feel

Steve Swink

Some of the brain science used by Swink to explain the ethereal 'rightness' of certain games seems dodgily simplistic, and it's a pity that the companion website's interactive examples are gone. But the *Tony Hawk* alumni convinces as he zooms his game microscope to high resolution, fastidiously auditing the tiny elements of polish in *Gears Of War* and *Castlevania*, and considering how the weight and material of game controllers contribute to game feel. This is the only book that compares *World Of Warcraft* to twitchy Dreamcast racer *Vanishing Point* and gets away with it.

04 Glued To Games

Scott Rigby and Richard M Ryan

Don't be put off by the cover: Rigby and Ryan are serious psychologists and serious gamers, and they bring news about your brain. We play not because games are fun, but because they light up our mind's pleasure points through Sims-style need satisfaction, and provide a "just world" against the unfairness of reality. There are real revelations – you'll be very wary of NPCs after discovering that their shoulder-shrugging indifference actually makes you feel worse about yourself. And the game violence chapter is excellent: heavily referenced, it refuses the easy answers on both sides of the debate.

05 Half-Real

Jesper Juul

While this is a disjointed book – it's built partly from earlier essays – Juul's idea of games as incoherent worlds, where we're half in and out of the rules on one hand and the story on the other, is compelling. He challenges clichés (the words 'game' and 'play' don't have an implied relationship in many languages; Csikszentmihalyi's all-conquering 'flow' falls apart in the face of *WarioWare*, of all things),
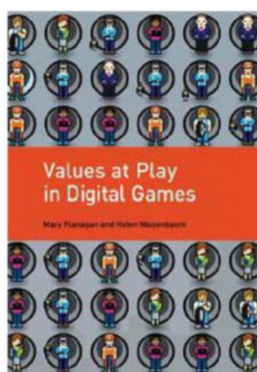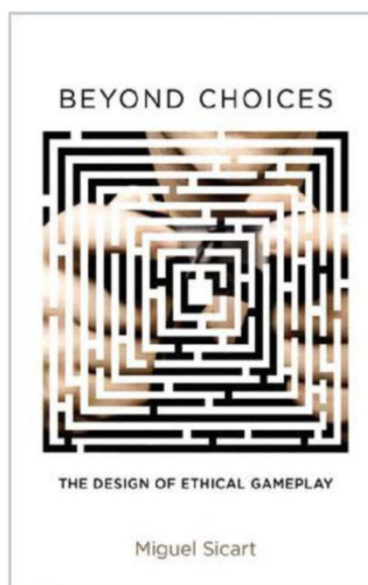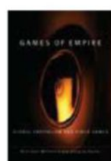
and is illuminating on players developing a repertoire of puzzle-solving approaches. And in his concentric model of games, you'll be pleased to find out at last that "watching a fireplace" is now, definitively, not a game.

06 Values At Play In Digital Games
Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum
The ambition here is similar to Beyond Choices, but Flanagan and Nissenbaum go further: the authors have tried-and-tested frameworks and tools that developers and lecturers can use to embed ethical and political values into games – not just in their themes, but also day-to-day development. This is mesmerisingly written, with many intelligent examples of reflective games, most notably the devastatingly simple Rwandan civil-war game *Hush*. We're a long way from an industry full of the authors' "conscientious designers", but they're better than most at providing practical tips to getting there.

07 Aesthetic Theory And The Video Game
Graeme Kirkpatrick
Obtuse at times – non-philosophers will struggle – Kirkpatrick's book is an illuminating exploration of how a player's body and a game intertwine, or how "a generation of young men have grown up dancing with their hands". You'll never look at a controller the same way again after Kirkpatrick explains how we've been conditioned to use carefully designed blobs of plastic to influence an image.

08 Ethnographies Of The Video Game
Helen Thornham
A rare book that observes and talks to young adults playing games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Pro Evolution Soccer* and *Mario Kart*, with riveting results. It's difficult to not pick holes in some of the methodology and conclusions, but Thornham is right to consider this book an intervention in the way games are theorised – it's clear from it that games are

impossible to untangle from social and gender dynamics.

09 Games Of Empire
Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greg De Peuter
Inspired by a 2000 book on post-capitalism, this delves into the dark side of the game industry, fervently accusing it of being complicit with militarisation and inequality. It certainly overdoes it – the authors are well aware that their later idea of games as a uniting force for utopian social change might seem "completely implausible". But it's refreshingly different, and entertaining in its righteous anger.

10 How To Do Things With Videogames
Ian Bogost
Topical for a chapter in which Bogost argues that games will win their battle for relevance by becoming as unassuming a part of everyone's lives as other media. A rich sightseeing tour through gaming's many uses – from electioneering to relaxation – and with a nice line in cheekily

teasing importance from trifles such as Atari's *ET* and 'Wash Joe Jonas'.

11 Introduction To Game Analysis
Clara Fernández-Vara
This is aimed at students, so older readers can skip the bits about how to finish that essay. But otherwise it's a very readable framework for thinking critically about games, with examples of both games and articles that stretch across time and cultures, and several easy-to-digest summaries of some of the big thinkers featured elsewhere on these pages.

12 Video Game Spaces
Michael Nitsche
It's worth persevering with this hard-going philosophical argument, since Nitsche's five-part model for the player's world pops up often in game studies. He's insightful on how a game's presentation indirectly influences us, especially in terms of how we're slowly learning to understand and control more complex camera techniques borrowed from cinema. ■

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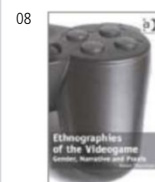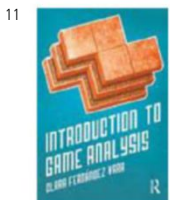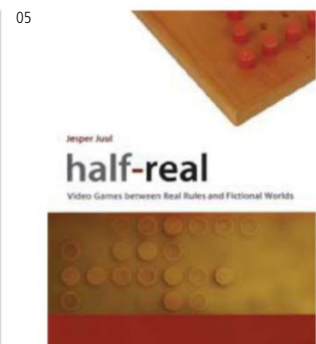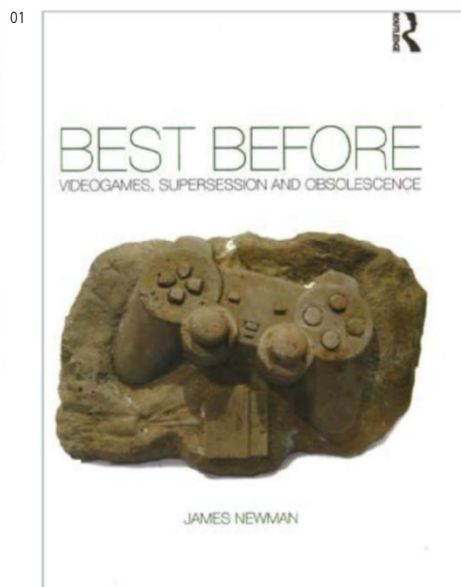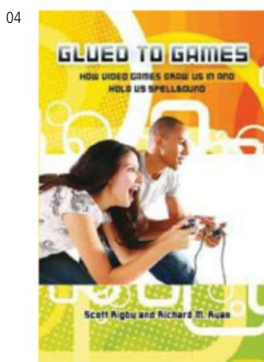
THE

MAKING

OF...

OLLIOLLI

Frustration, restarts, and a lot of grinding:
how Roll7 landed its breakout skating game

By Edward Smith

J ohn Ribbins had a lot on his mind in 2012. RollingSound, a media training company he'd co-managed, had just been shut down after funding cuts by the Conservative-led coalition government. All 100 employees there had lost their jobs and the stress of it had driven **Simon Bennett**, Ribbins' friend and RollingSound's founder, out of the country in an attempt to recuperate.

On top of that, the pair's still-ongoing venture, a game studio based in London's New Cross Gate, was in trouble. Roll7 had started in 2008 after *Dead Ends*, a game about knife crime overseen by Ribbins at RollingSound, had proved a success. Now, four years later, it was surviving on freelance programming work and a few educational projects for universities. Roll7 was staying afloat, but it wasn't the developer Ribbins, Bennett or final co-founder Thomas Hegarty had dreamed of. They'd put out one other game, iOS platformer *Gets To The Exit*, but it was hardly the breakout hit Roll7 needed. With money running out, Ribbins showed up at Develop in Brighton to try to drum up support.

"The idea was to turn up with an iPad and *Gets To The Exit*, and try to get it in front of as many people from the press as possible," Ribbins says. "But it wasn't very successful. We didn't even have a stand."

"By this point, as well as *Gets To The Exit*, we'd done a lot of other projects for marketing agencies and places like that. We'd learned a lot about what worked and what didn't, and we knew we couldn't just make something and hope that it would pay for itself. We were trying to save up a buffer. But the gun-for-hire stuff was really starting to suck."

Understandably stressed, Ribbins hit the bar on the closing night of Develop. There he bumped into James Marsden, an independent developer who'd recently launched *Coconut Dodge* for PS3. After sharing a few beers, Ribbins took out his iPhone. He had a prototype skating game that he wanted to show off.

"At the time, it was a super-basic three-pixel game I'd made for iOS," Ribbins says. "James looked like a skater, so I thought he could try it out. After playing for a while, he told me I should show it to Sony. We were both drunk by now, so I just nodded along – like, 'Yeah, sure, absolutely,' not expecting anything to come of it. But he emailed me the next day

Originally, the idea was the trick list in *OlliOlli* would be unlocked gradually, and players started with a basic jump

and introduced me to Shahid [Ahmad, business development manager at Sony].

"We set up a meeting and showed Shahid what we were working on. I got a kick under the table from Tom to show this skating game, which back then was called *OlliOlliOlli*, and Shahid played it for about 20 minutes straight without even talking to us. He put the iPad down and

"IT'S DIFFICULT WHEN SOMEONE LOOKS AT SOMETHING THAT'S TAKEN YOU HOURS TO CODE AND JUST TELLS YOU IT'S SHIT"

asked if we'd want to bring it to Vita."

By now, Bennett had returned to the UK and was ready to get back to work. With investment from Sony secured, he decided Roll7 would drop its other development projects to focus exclusively on what was now dubbed *OlliOlli*.

"When I came back, the company was still working on some other projects using the capital we'd saved up," Bennett says. "I told them that making a game for Sony was the biggest opportunity we were ever going to have, so we shut down all our other efforts and put everything into *OlliOlli*. At least that way, if it went wrong, we could say we gave it our all."

Sony, however, wanted to remain hands-off during *OlliOlli*'s development. Ahmad had previously brought *Thomas Was Alone*, *Hotline Miami* and *Lone Survivor* to PlayStation, and was spearheading a push for creative, new and, crucially, independently made titles.

"We had this one feature we wanted to get rid of, some music-linked game-editing mode," Ribbins says. "So we went to Sony and I spent about half an hour talking, nonstop, trying to justify binning this thing. When I'd finished, Shahid just said, 'I'll be honest, you had me at the first sentence. I just wanted to see how long you'd talk for.' Sony always insisted that this was our game, and we could do what we liked."

Sony left Roll7 to its own devices, and with a lot of decisions to make. "When we realised we'd been given so much trust and control, it was kind of a wow moment," says Bennett. "However, that quickly turned into 'Oh, shit,' because now there was no one guiding us."

Roll7 had become used to building games based on others' specifications. Now, it was shouldering the responsibility of making a title of its own imagining, to be sold on one of the biggest labels in the industry. The initial months were especially pressured for Bennett.

"Every milestone meeting we turned up to, we knew there were some requirements for that milestone that hadn't been met," he says. "Plus, we'd decided to build our own engine, which meant that, for a long time, unless you know a lot about coding, there wasn't a lot to see. There'd be big deadlines coming up and we wouldn't have anything to show. It made me think we weren't ever going to get it finished."

Sony might have been hands-off but it did offer support. Roll7 had access to its testing department and picked up a lot of feedback, particularly about *OlliOlli*'s difficulty. "Sony's tester couldn't play our original version," Bennett says. "There was one meeting with Shahid where we were discussing the game while this guy just sat in the corner saying, 'Fuck! Fuck it!' over and over. The game definitely would have been harder – too hard – without Sony's input."

OlliOlli also had to pass Sony's technical requirements checklist, a catalogue of rules and standards that had to be met before the game could launch. "It was so intimidating," Bennett says. "It was my responsibility to make sure we passed it, but I knew all these stories about even big studios that hadn't [made it] through. I felt way out of my depth. Fortunately, Spencer [Low, producer at Sony] was very forgiving."

Still, development on *OlliOlli* was progressing slowly. Working alongside senior programmer Nikos Asfis, Ribbins was struggling to get the engine to render on Vita. He'd ▶

designed the background tiles for the first level, but transferring them to the screen was difficult. Roll7 had committed to *OlliOlli* at the beginning of February, 2013. By the end of March, the studio had rendered just one part of the game: the top-left-hand corner of the first level's background.

"I remember the point that that happened," Ribbins says. "I was in the office with Niko at about 1am, and we were singing and dancing because we'd finally rendered this grey square. The next morning Simon and Tom came in and understandably weren't quite as ecstatic as we were. We'd got something to render, but this was about two weeks before we had to go and show Sony a working game."

Roll7 had a lot to do. Bennett was cutting deals with the musicians who'd provide the soundtrack while Ribbins worked on art and design and Asfis continued to program. That core team, plus Hegarty, was extended by freelancers, who'd come and go whenever *OlliOlli* needed artwork or improvements to its interface. It was gruelling, which began to take its toll on Ribbins' and Bennett's relationship. "It felt like one long argument between John and I," Bennett says."I had a breakdown about halfway through, because I never thought we'd finish the game.

"It's difficult when someone comes, looks at something that's taken you eight hours to code, and just tells you it's shit," Ribbins says. "What caused the most arguments was working out *OlliOlli*'s metagame: deciding how people would progress through levels and how we'd ensure they knew enough about a mechanic before moving on. Originally we had this idea that players would begin with no tricks except an ollie and would learn more as they progressed. But to test the game, we had to throw all the tricks in to see how they worked, and we had so much fun playing it that way that it seemed wrong to force people to go for ten hours before they'd unlock [them]. So we had to have a rethink. Things like this were always a bone of contention."

Come summer, Ribbins was hard at work on *OlliOlli*'s animation. A skater himself, he could draw the simpler tricks, like kickflips and shuvits, from memory. But the rest required some research.

"I found an amazing YouTube channel where this guy had filmed every skateboard trick in 10,000-frames-per-second slow motion," Ribbins says." They'd even filmed it from this side-on

Q&A

Simon Bennett
Producer, Roll7

Did the relatively low sales figures of Vita hardware, especially in Europe, make you concerned about *OlliOlli*'s potential?
Our sales on Vita have been massive. I think *OlliOlli* was an ideal game for the platform because it was so easy to pick up and play. I also think Vita owners liked having something that they could say started on Vita. It was, it was purpose built, and no one else can touch it. Now we've done the ports to PS3, PS4 and Steam, I think it shows that if you do well on Vita, you can do well elsewhere. When we started on *OlliOlli*, nobody at Roll7 owned a Vita. After a couple of months, we all had one – not just to test our game but to play a bunch of others. It's a great piece of hardware.

How did the ports come about? Was that something you had in mind and prepared for from the beginning, or did you have to adapt the game later?
It was only earmarked for Vita and we never considered any ports. But we had a meeting after we finished the game and John rightly explained that my job now would be getting it on every platform we could. We'd managed to recoup on Sony's investment pretty quickly, so they pulled us in for a meeting and asked us to port it to PS3 and PS4.

Apart from giving you feedback from testers, what other support did Sony offer?
We got caught up in this push towards indies, both on Vita and by Sony as a whole. They did a lot to drive sales, in the US particularly, and gave us a good release date. I think if we'd launched before January, around Christmas time, we would have got left by the wayside. Sony gave us a lot of support.

angle, so it was basically in the view that we used for *OlliOlli*. A lot of work was essentially rotoscoping that down to our character. I'd start by mapping every trick animation onto a pixel stickman and then I'd essentially trace over that in the more detailed art style."

It was a long process, because Ribbins' enthusiasm for the subject meant he wanted to ensure the details were spot on. "It was important to me was that if you did a 180 spin and landed it, you'd then be riding backwards," he says. "That was something we hadn't seen before in other 2D skateboarding games, though we quickly realised why. If you want to have your

skater facing the other way, you have to go back and redraw all his animations so his back is to the screen. We ended up having to make something like 7,000 frames of animation. But as a skater, I wanted a 360 flip to look like a 360 flip."

While Ribbins finalised the animation, Bennett hit the campaign trail. He flew to LA for E3 and demoed the game to whomever he could. Some got it, others didn't, and Bennett was still feeling shaky. "I wasn't in the best place," he says. "We were at the Sony stand, with just this one Vita, basically showing the game to anyone who came past. I think we met with about five journalists and although some picked it up, others just didn't take to it. So when I got back to London we had this big meeting and tore the game apart, spent about three months dismantling it and testing it over and over. Even so, we'd kind of settled on the idea that it was going to get slated and not do well. We thought it would be the end of the company."

After a few finishing touches from Ribbins, like a little green bar under the board that would indicate a perfect grind, *OlliOlli* was ready to go. It launched in January, 2014. Bennett couldn't believe the reception.

"For about two weeks I'd get up and open Twitter and it was just like a dream," he says. "I couldn't understand how this thing that people hadn't really taken to just a few months before was now getting all this love. It had been the worst nine months of my working career. By the end, my friendship was John was pretty much in tatters. It was only because *OlliOlli* had become such a huge success that we were able to sort of hug each other and cry."

Roll7 threw a party and invited everyone along who'd worked on the game. John Ribbins once again found himself at a bar, thinking about *OlliOlli*. But he'd come a long way since Develop in 2012, and so had Roll7. After a few hours of drinking and playing *Nidhogg*, which had also released that month, Tom Hegarty checked his phone. "He looked up and shouted, 'We've won Gamespot game of the month!" Bennett explains. "It was the inaugural award, and we'd won. It felt like fate, because it just so happened we were all together right at that moment. We ordered some tequila. There were tears. It was overwhelming.

"People who don't know Roll7 might think we just came out from nowhere. But we've paid our dues. We've worked our balls off making games and doing jobs for other people, and it's been a very long road." ■

1 The avatar as he appeared in *OlliOlliOlli*, the original prototype game that Roll7 pitched to Sony.
2 Roll7's office in New Cross, London, pictured in 2009, four years before *OlliOlli*'s creation.
3 Shahid Ahmad and Spencer Lowe were instrumental in bringing *OlliOlli* to PlayStation, and providing valuable feedback.
4 The artwork for backgrounds was the first thing that Roll7 was able to render on PS Vita.
5 Designer John Ribbins wanted to ensure everything grindable was clearly telegraphed in-game.
6 While Roll7's programmers worked on the initial renders, everyone else made tile sheets

CURVE STUDIOS

How a work-for-hire developer
learned from the best to become
the go-to outfit for indie gaming

BY CHRIS SCHILLING

The Curve story is one of persistence, daring, opportunism, and a dash of good fortune, but like any good indie studio, its successes are built upon a foundation of friendship, team spirit and no little intelligence. Though it has had to change its approach to adapt to unpredictable market conditions, its versatility and resourcefulness have seen it thrive where others have fallen.

It helps that the company has an experienced backbone. MD **Jason Perkins** has some 32 years of industry experience, with the likes of Sony and GT Interactive on his CV. So when the time came to form his own studio, his extensive connections allowed him to assemble his dream team: the seven people that Curve started with were handpicked from those Perkins had worked with and whose reputations preceded them.

Design director **Jonathan Biddle** was one of the first on board, as was technical director **Richie Turner**, each director adopting a clearly defined role. "Jase is the business guy, Rich is the tech guy and I'm the creative guy," Biddle tells us. "And we trust each other to do those jobs. No one else wants to be the creative guy, and I certainly don't want to be the business guy."

From the beginning, the studio was keen to work on its own IP, but it needed to be in a comfortable position to be able to fund it. That meant work-for-hire jobs. "Our big break came when we did the *Buzz* games for PSP," Turner says. "Andrew Eades, who runs Relentless, was a friend of mine. I was talking to him about *Buzz*, and at the time they were looking at [bringing it to] PSP, and wondering if anyone could do it." Turner volunteered Curve for the job, a deal was struck, and the studio went on to develop five editions of the game for the Sony portable.

With the money Curve needed starting to roll in, Biddle began developing an idea that he'd conceived in GameMaker in his spare time. *Explodemon* was a 2D platformer inspired by the likes of *Bangai-O* and *Super Metroid*, and the studio collectively decided this was to be its first venture into self-publishing. "It was just taking off at that time," says Turner. "Hello Games was just about to release *Joe Danger*, and all our chums were [saying], 'We're going to go it alone.' I don't think, with retrospect, it was a great decision. *Explodemon* wasn't the success we had hoped it would be."

Still, Curve refused to be downhearted. The game's failure impressed upon the team the importance of careful budgeting as well as the

For MD Perkins, the capacity to loan out artists and coders makes Curve stand out. "For an indie dev deciding which publisher to go with, that's an extra benefit we can offer"

need to form and nourish relationships with platform holders. "You've got to get out there and press the flesh," Turner adds. "It's about your after-sales, your lifetime management. All valuable lessons, but we learned [them] the hard way."

In the meantime, Curve had been pitching ideas to Nintendo. In fact, it had been doing so, with little success, since it was founded, but the Game Developers Conference in 2008 proved a pivotal moment for the studio. "We had this idea

for a game about water," Biddle says. "We sat down with [Nintendo] and pitched a few things, and we didn't think they'd liked any of them; they were quite po-faced about it, probably because they'd been sat in a room for a week listening to pitch after pitch." Several weeks later, the phone call came out of the blue: Nintendo was keen on the idea, and wanted to pay Curve to develop a prototype, or 'experiment' as the company called it.

Years later, Biddle would discover this was a rarity for the publisher. "I asked our producer how many things they'd picked up from these pitching sessions," Biddle says. The response? One. "Not very many things get through that wringer," he adds. "So we were amazed to get that, and we spent six months looking at the tech and the water physics to see if Wii could run it, if the motion-control system could work, and whether the idea actually had any legs."

The next half-year was particularly enjoyable for Curve, because for once there were no rules: the studio could design the whole project from

scratch. Which isn't to say development of what eventually became *Hydroventure* (or *Fluidity* in the US) was easy. Games in 2D with a traditional avatar were one thing; working out how to control a force of nature was something else entirely. Herding a pool of 200 water particles meant building a game where the player could potentially be in 200 places at once.

Working with Nintendo wasn't just exciting, but also an invaluable learning experience, particularly from a design standpoint. The studio sent over regular builds, and when assessments returned, they were extensive and meticulous. Biddle would send 3,000-word emails and get

"IWATA COULDN'T WATCH THE WIIWARE DEMO BECAUSE IT MADE HIM ILL. HE SUFFERED FROM SIMULATION SICKNESS"

similarly lengthy replies. "The criticisms they give you on the whole process are like gold dust," says Turner. "When they say less of this or more of this, you pay attention. All the platform holders have got their game evangelists and design guys who give very valid feedback, but when you're talking to Nintendo, you're only a couple of steps removed from the likes of Miyamoto."

Indeed, one piece of feedback came right from the top. "Iwata couldn't stand to watch the WiiWare demo because it made him really ill," says Biddle. "He suffered from simulation sickness, so he literally couldn't watch the game that he was signing off on." Curve tried a number of solutions to the issue, the final game's camera brackets a direct result of Iwata's queasiness.

Hydroventure was a critical success, but though the review scores were high, sales figures were not. Microsoft and Sony might have had their digital strategies in place, but WiiWare games were left comparatively high and dry. Even so, Nintendo was pleased with the game – enough to request that Curve look into a 3DS ▶

Curve has a small core of staff, which is regularly swelled by the huge roster of freelancers. To the left is evidence of the work that went into bringing *Stealth Inc 2: A Game Of Clones* to Wii U, a rare timed exclusive for Nintendo's machine, and a sign of Curve's heritage

sequel. The first pitch was rejected, since motion controls and glasses-free 3D were considered incompatible. But once Nintendo realised that stereoscopy wasn't quite as big a selling point as expected, the publisher suggested that a 2D version with gyro controls would be fine. "It did well for us," says Turner, though Biddle suggests it didn't sell well enough for Nintendo, which owns the IP, to consider a follow-up. "We'd love to go back, but the budget would be significantly more for Wii U. We've had discussions, but the last pitch was a while ago now."

Still, Nintendo's influence can be felt in the studio's subsequent output. Biddle happily describes its impact on *Stealth Bastard*. "One of the things we learned from [*Hydroventure*] was how to make compelling levels, how to make puzzles. It was almost nothing but puzzles, so we had to make them so good that they could support the entire game. We learned how to lead the player, how to give them enough info, but in a way that's entertaining. *Stealth Bastard* became what it was because of the work we'd done with Nintendo on *Hydroventure*."

Taking design cues from *Metal Gear Solid* and *Super Meat Boy*, this abrasive platformer had much more than an eye-catching name: challenging and well designed, its free PC launch was so warmly received that the studio decided to release an expanded version, *Stealth Bastard Deluxe*. The response took Biddle by surprise: what had begun as an experiment in design had become an unlikely hit. "I just wanted to make something little, put it out for free and move on… Then everyone liked it and spoilt everything! So we put it out on Steam, then Humble Bundle wanted Mac and Linux versions. After that, we did an Android version and then an iOS one."

By that time, working on such a wide variety of formats was no novelty. Opportunities for a

company of its size were dwindling. But the studio sensed an opportunity when Sony began to offer strategic funding to smaller developers, primarily to bring indie games to Vita. Perkins, with his Sony connections, was well placed to capitalise. "I'd love to say we had a big strategy meeting," he says, "but the truth is that we were gently nudged in that direction by the lack of funding available in the space we used to be in."

Having established that there was potential in signing up PC games for console ports, Perkins began to approach developers. The stars aligned when he tuned into radio show One Life Left and heard Mike Bithell talking about *Thomas Was Alone*. "When we first approached him, *Thomas*

hadn't done the huge numbers that it must have done now, but it sounded interesting and Mike seemed like a really interesting person. I downloaded it the next day, and then we made an approach. Simultaneously, Sony had made an approach to Mike as well, so very quickly we managed to do a deal that suited everyone."

Conversations with Terry Cavanagh to bring *Super Hexagon* to consoles sadly never came to fruition, though Cavanagh did recommend Curve to Jasper Byrne, creator of *Lone Survivor*, and the studio brought it to PS3 and Vita, and later PS4 and Wii U. Despite releasing just after *Grand Theft Auto V* ("we've now learned that is a really bad time to launch," Perkins says), it has been one of the company's biggest hits to date.

The studio has also learned persistence pays off. Curve only signed up Facepalm Games' *The*

Swapper after Perkins had emailed Olli Harjola – one half of the two-man team – 25 times. Harjola has since put Curve in touch with other Finnish devs. "Hopefully, he was happy with the service we provided," says Perkins modestly.

In its previous financial year, Curve launched 37 individual titles. This year, it's up to 56 – more than one console submission every week. While networking has been important in securing work, the studio would be nowhere without an efficient tech team. Today, Curve has streamlined the porting process, which removes a good deal of old-fashioned legwork. "We've written engines in the past, but this one, Nucleus, is literally OpenGL standardised across every platform," Perkins

"STEALTH BASTARD BECAME WHAT IT WAS BECAUSE OF THE WORK WE'D DONE WITH NINTENDO ON HYDROVENTURE"

explains. "If you've written your game in that, it'll automatically work on our platform." Once a game is ported across, it's usually running within weeks, after which comes optimisation.

Today, Curve is branching out in every sense. It has recently begun to loan employees out to other studios, and already has six games signed up for release in 2015. Biddle, meanwhile, is working on *White Space*, a procedurally generated firstperson adventure inspired by *Tau Ceti* and *Spelunky*. "It's about problem solving," he says. "Sometimes the problems are those you've made yourself, but either way, you need to be good at very quickly finding solutions." He's talking about game design, but that could easily be Curve's motto. The studio's willingness to reinvent itself is the reason why it is now, as it hoped to be, in control of its destiny. ◼

① Having no prior coding experience, Jonathan Biddle was encouraged to try out GameMaker. After a couple of "crap" experiments, he used it to create the *Explodemon* prototype back in 2006.

② The original *Stealth Inc* (AKA *Stealth Bastard*) was never released on Nintendo platforms, but its Wii U sequel makes fine use of GamePad for co-operative play and its flexible stage creator.

③ Curve saw potential in the *Tetris*-meets-*Lemmings* conceit PC puzzler *MouseCraft* from Polish indie Crunching Koalas, porting it to all three current PlayStation platforms.

④ For *Hydroventure: Spin Cycle*, Nintendo suggested puzzles that involved turning the host 3DS hardware upside down. Though it led to a few headaches, the more compact stages were better suited to portable play

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Destiny PS4

With our Warlock at level 30, we decide it's time for another character. Our Titan races to level 20, then jumps up to 24 thanks to the legendary gear in our vault. Further progress means spending hours scouring the Moon for Helium Filaments, and at last, after 150 hours, we begin to lose interest. By the time you read this, *The Dark Below* will be out, and we'll be back on the hook again. It was nice while it lasted.

Mario Kart 8 Wii U

We worried it might seem incongruous, but jump-boosting past the Master Sword on the Hyrule Castle track in *Mario Kart 8*'s first DLC pack leverages familiarity to fantastic effect. In fact, that's something of a theme for this addon, the recreation of *F-Zero*'s Mute City a particular delight thanks to playful touches such as pit areas refilling your coins. This is DLC done right: a fresh injection of life for Wii U's joyous racer.

Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor PS4

Another DLC expansion this month sends us back to Mordor, this time to impale orcs on the blades of warrior princess Lithariel. The Nemesis system still hasn't lost its shine, its web of enemies as enjoyable to study and unpick as ever, but the open world's flaws are all the more obvious in the light of *Far Cry 4*'s wonderfully dynamic Himalayan landscapes. Here's hoping the inevitable sequel offers something as imaginative as *Shadow Of Mordor*'s standout feature.

Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Unfinished business

This time of year is supposed to be a celebration. It's a time when months of hype finally result in a game in your hands, when every week brings with it a glut of high-quality releases. Publishers have long loved the last three months of the year, and we've always understood. For them, it's the best slot on the calendar to release games. For us, it's the best time to play them.

Until this year, anyway. With *DriveClub* and *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*, the back end of 2014 has shown that Q4 is now too important to many publishers to miss, with technical quality a secondary consideration. This month yields yet another entrant to this hall of shame in *Assassin's Creed Unity* (p108). It has ambition, scale and great potential, then undermines them all because neither the release schedule nor the accounts department could tolerate a delay.

Nintendo would never sacrifice quality, although its decision to delay the European release of *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker* (p114) into 2015 caused no little disappointment. This, again, was a business decision. Nintendo would prefer you to focus your attention and your disposable income on *Super Smash Bros For Wii U* (p112). Again, it's understandable, especially given that Nintendo can't rely on thirdparties to fill out Wii U's release schedule any more. But equally, it only underscores the fact that the executive in the suit is more important than the person with the controller.

Any hardened suit would surely condemn *This War Of Mine* (p118) to failure. A bleak WWII survival sim from an unknown Polish studio has no business succeeding in the busiest months of the year. Yet 11 Bit Studio's game shot up the Steam charts at launch, and is one of our favourite games of 2014. It's a much-needed reminder that quality can still sometimes triumph over marketing.

Far Cry 4

O h, Ajay, you *monster*. It's not your fault, you understand — you seem a personable sort, and you're a good son, returning to the country of your birth to grant your mother's final wish and scatter her ashes. No, this one's on us. It's because of us that you ping an arrow into the first pig you see, cut it open with a hunting knife, scoop out the goo inside and pop it in a bag. It's our fault that within a couple of hours of setting foot in the Himalayan nation of Kyrat you have hunted, killed and skinned more animals than we can count. You see, this is *Far Cry*, and you don't know how it works, that the trick is to make yourself as powerful as possible as early as you can. That means crafting, and that means a rapid, indiscriminate cull. One NPC puts it best, after watching us fire a rocket at the feet of a placid rhinoceros, "What the hell are you doing?" Sorry, old chap, but we need a bigger bag for explosives. Within a couple of hours, we are frighteningly tooled up, the Kyrati landscape is an ecological disaster site, and Ajay Ghale has been cast as a psychopath.

In fairness, he's in pretty good company. While *Far Cry 3* set out to explore the darker side of insanity, here Ubisoft is more interested in its brighter points. The cast is a carousel of almost-likeable headcases, pink-suited despot Pagan Min giving way to born-again arms dealer Longinus, camp fashion designer Mr Chiffon, and Yogi and Reggie, a pair of backpackers offering spiritual enlightenment for your Rizla money, and who just can't resist sticking Ghale with syringes of a psychotropic concoction. Then there's Hurk, a bearded ally whose form is borrowed by co-op partners as you wreak emergent havoc across this beautiful — until you got here, anyway — open world. As an ensemble, they help *Far Cry 4* dodge the tonal disconnect of its predecessor, which surrounded its fist-bumping, thrill-seeking lead with a cast of darkly demented murderers.

Admittedly, Brody would have loved it here. Kyrat may lack the Rook Islands' tropical splendour, but it's more of an adventure playground. This is made clear when an early trader offers up a wingsuit, something *Far Cry 3* held back for almost 30 missions. It's a useful tool in this vertiginous landscape, where following winding roads to a waypoint might take you a kilometre out of your way. How Brody would have delighted in hopping off the nearest sheer drop, spreading his wings, then heading to his objective as the crow flies. A grappling hook caters for the reverse situation, offering routes up or around mountainsides via preordained mounting points. The Buzzer minicopter is a speedier alternative to both, but it's a rare sight on Kyrat's enormous map.

You start in the far southwest, and will likely stay there for hours, hunting to upgrade your holster and loadout capacity, and spending skill points to further bolster your options. From there, you spread east and north, climbing towers to uncover the map and

The studio has focused on flexibility even more, taking the outpost ethos and applying it to Kyrat as a whole

clearing out enemy outposts. These activities are, as before, the beating heart of the game, but outposts can now be cleared out on elephant back, or without lifting a finger by lobbing some bait over the walls and letting local predators do the wet work. Despite the additions, it's all highly familiar, feeling not like a continuation of the *Far Cry* series but a straight sequel to *Far Cry 3*. That's no bad thing, necessarily, but the game does a poor job of setting itself apart from its predecessor, at least initially. Its opening hits the same beats: you arrive, are captured by and introduced to the villain, then escape into the arms of the opposing faction. There is, however, one slight but instructive difference. *Far Cry 3*'s opening insisted that you sneak to freedom. Here, you dash to a truck and shoot your way out in seconds, and can then choose your approach as the world opens out before you.

After that, you can't help but spend the opening hours identifying and appreciating other subtle changes. The studio has focused even more on flexibility, taking the ethos of the outposts and applying it to Kyrat as a whole. You now have a choice of multiple missions at once, for instance, doing away with wearying treks towards a single distant mission marker. As well as the 30-plus outposts, there are four fortresses, one each for Min and his lieutenants. They're essentially outposts, but bigger, more fortified and better staffed, although you can still go in quiet or loud, grapple or fly over the walls, or ride an elephant right through the front door.

Flexibility is one word for it, but empowerment might be a better fit. When you first visit a trader, you immediately unlock a dozen guns, and while Ubisoft Montreal can't quite keep that pace up, it has a pretty good go. Skill points come at a lick, and any weapon you pick up out in the field is yours to keep. One early side mission yields a grenade launcher, which we kept by our side right through to the endgame — an example of, in the context of a Ubisoft release, the game's refreshing willingness to subvert its own systems. It even finds time to subvert other titles, too. Across seven years of *Assassin's Creed*, the call of an eagle has been a warming pat on the back for successfully scaling a viewpoint. Here, it is a warning tap on the shoulder advising you that you're about to have your eyeballs pecked out.

Eagles are the worst: tough to shoot down and attacking with a canned animation that tends to kick in just as you've finally got the thing lined up in your sights. There are other irritants, too, like the tiny, aggressive honey badgers. Keep your distance from a Bengal tiger, however, and it'll let you pass; rhinos pay you no mind until you start firing rockets at their feet. The wildlife is more believable than in *Far Cry 3*, where it was impossible to look at a shark without seeing a wallet. You'll feel guilty as you stoop, knife in hand, ▶

ABOVE Co-op adds a hilarious dynamic to the open world, but it is just for fun. You're forbidden from having company during story missions, and any progress made elsewhere only counts for the host.
LEFT Bell Towers replace *Far Cry 3*'s Radio Towers, though the principle remains the same: smash up some broadcasting equipment at the summit to unfog part of the map. There's more interior work than there was before, and good use of the grappling hook later on

BELOW The tiger becomes an ally in the Shangri-la side missions, where you sneak through a mystical world populated by teleporting demons, marking targets for your feline aide and mopping up the stragglers with your crude but hefty knife
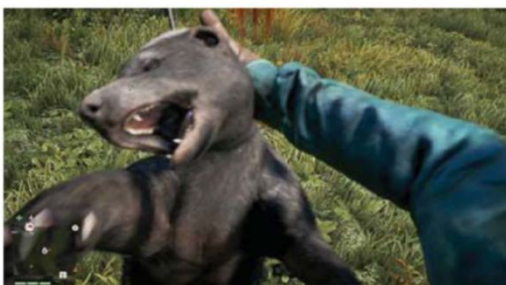
ABOVE Honey Badgers are almost entirely hidden by long grass, and are fast too, so lining up a shot before their canned attack animation is a tall order. These critters are the sort of thing sawn-off shotguns are made for

over the furry corpse of a snow leopard. Min may be the marketing focus, but *Far Cry 4*'s menagerie produces its real stars — wildlife is often a threat, sometimes an aid, but always helps give Kyrat a sense of place.

It's a great boon, too, to Ubisoft's well-defined approach to making open worlds. Where it might drop a trinket in another game, here it spawns a bear; instead of a guard patrol, you'll face a pack of wild dogs. It gives the world room to breathe, and offers the impression that everything has been placed by a designer rather than an analyst. The elephant in a field half a kilometre from an outpost isn't set dressing, it's a suggestion: sure, it'll slow the journey down, but you'll capture the base in seconds. Side missions are carefully placed, and dynamic events are regular without being overbearing. It all hangs together with delightful coherence.

The campaign is, in places, a different matter. While a developer taking your toys away can be powerful when used sparingly, here it's leant on a little too regularly, and a handful of more linear missions become trial-and-error exercises in working out what the studio wants you to do. It puts a slight dampener on the campaign's main focus, dubbed Balance Of Power, in which you must choose between two very different perspectives on how Kyrat should be set free. Sabal wants a return to the nation's traditional religious values, and to protect lives; Amita has a more radical take, and values the big picture over a few casualties.

These choices are no single-mission conceit. Sabal is furious when our decision to search one allied camp for intel instead of protecting another results in nine deaths, but our discovery yields plans of a much worse assault on a cherished monastery. It all builds to a genuinely uncomfortable final decision that saw us

PRODUCTION EDITOR
In addition to open-world co-op and asymmetrical PvP, *Far Cry 4* also comes with a flexible, powerful map editor. Pick one of four mission types (Hunt, Assault, Extraction or Outpost) then drop buildings, enemies, animals and scenery into place, tweaking the landscape and foliage as you go. AI can be assigned animations – bears catch fish, dogs dig holes, soldiers light cigarettes or relieve themselves against walls – while modifiers let you remove fall damage, or make the player invincible. Creations can be shared online, though while the prospect of infinite outposts on tap is a thrilling one, the number of god-mode wildlife-killing sprees we've discovered so far seems like further proof that the players are *Far Cry*'s real psychos.

switch a game-long allegiance, and while it still might not quite sit right with those upset by Brody's role as enlightened white saviour, Ghale's roots make his arbitration a little easier to stomach. As one western NPC puts it: "American on the inside, one of them on the outside. You're perfect."

He isn't. He's worse than Brody in a way, who in his captured friends at least had motivation for his tropical rampage. Ghale keeps his mother's ashes in his shoulder bag across 20-plus hours of slaughtering man, woman and beast. Like the cull for crafting materials at the start, however, it's our doing, not his — something one of the endings makes clear in insightful fashion.

That, really, is this game's greatest achievement; where its predecessor's inconsistencies made you question the writing staff, *Far Cry 4* makes you question yourself. *Far Cry 3* asked for the definition of insanity, and its sequel answers it. Insanity is postponing your mother's dying wish to skin dogs, to climb one side of a mountain then jump off the other, to spend hours in the Shanath arena working through wave-based survival challenges in front of a baying crowd, and doing a lot of it with a smile on your face. It's an uncomfortable realisation, but also quite a wonderful one. *Far Cry 4* smooths out its predecessor's little kinks, expands its scale and scope, and gives you all the tools you could ever need to be the biggest psychopath on the planet. It is, in that sense, the ideal sequel. Now, if you'll excuse us, we've got a backpack full of rockets, and those poor rhinos aren't going to kill themselves.

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Post Script

Alex Hutchinson, creative director

Ubisoft Montreal's **Alex Hutchinson** is in a fine mood. There's been no post-launch holiday for him – he's already moved onto his next project – but he's spending his downtime watching videos of players visiting co-op havoc on Kyrat. Here, he discusses the world-building role of *Far Cry 4*'s wildlife, subverting conventions, and the perpetual conflict between story and systems in open-world games.

What was the overall philosophy for the role of the wildlife in this game, coming from *Far Cry 3*?
We tried to make them more believable, and more part of the ecosystem. They're doing things when you're not there: attacking each other, or NPCs. They're much more engaged in the world than in previous games. The elephants are vehicles, some animals are threats, some are ambient, some are part of the economy. We tried to fit them in everywhere, instead of just having them in the crafting. We were able to up the density as well, so they're more noticeable. We went back through all of their behaviours, trying to make each one a unique challenge in the same way that we try to make each weapon or tool uniquely useful.

How much work does something like that take?
It's one of the crazy things about modern game design. In years past, we'd have a couple of designers working on the game as a whole. Now you'll have a couple of designers working on one subsection. They're working in a cross-disciplinary team with artists, animators and AI engineers. It's an entire project's worth of tasks for those people. It's two years of work, full time, for a dozen or more people.

In a world of tigers, rhinos and bears, the eagles are the scariest animal in the game. Why is that?
It's funny, they're no more threatening or aggressive than any other animal. It's an illustration of a weird human trait that you see in architecture and interior design: humans suck at looking up. Because people look down a lot, and forward a lot, you get surprised from the air much more than you do from the ground.

The eagles also riff off *Assassin's Creed*'s lookouts. Did you go out of your way to be subversive?
That was the most fun we had with the game, I think, trying to say, "We know you know; you know we know." There's a lot of nodding, winking and black humour in there. But it's tricky. I think it's probably because Clint [Hocking] worked on *Far Cry 2*, and he coined the term, but there's always a lot of discussion of ludonarrative dissonance around *Far Cry*. We liked the idea of allowing people to be aware of the MacGuffins if they wanted to

> "It's the first time in a long while I've worked with a Brit on the narrative side. It made everything a bit bleaker"

pay attention. The entire ending speech – and I've seen it a couple of times online – people are saying, "No! Pagan Min tells you that you came here to bury your mom, but really you came here to blow stuff up." We can create any story conceit you want, about people you've never met, or we can just say, "Go on – hunt the bears, dodge eagles, throw grenades, and see what happens."

Ajay tells one NPC, "I'm just here to scatter my mother's ashes." Five minutes earlier, he was shooting tigers with explosive arrows.
Yeah, and it's funny who's picked up on it and who hasn't, who's appreciated it or found it confronting. It's a combo of my sense of humour and [executive producer] Dan Hay's, and our narrative director Mark Thompson, who's a Brit. It's the first time in a long while I've worked with a Brit on the narrative side. It made everything a bit bleaker.

As soon as the game was announced, some people dismissed it as *Far Cry 3.5*. How much did that grate?
It's frustrating to see the arbitrary way in which it's applied to games. Some games get this, but other games that rarely change don't get tarred with that brush at all. It's fascinating. Ubisoft at the moment is very much in the headlights of that, so we know we're going to get it.

It's a discussion of what the brand is. What are fans coming back to it expecting? What do we need to add to make sure it's unique and distinct, and what needs improving? Yes, the core loop of towers and outposts is still there, and it's still a shooter with animals, but I think we did a better job of pretty much everything... There's a funny approach to franchises in games that I can't quite get to the bottom of in my mind. I don't turn on Game Of Thrones and get upset that it's still the same world, with the same characters, season after season. Now we're out, you see a lot of people saying, "Oh, yeah, it's got a lot of the same things, *but*..."

Perhaps that's in part due to the way the tone has shifted across the series, but both this and *Far Cry 3* explore similar themes. Where would you like to see the series go next?
I think you're right. *Far Cry 2* was very serious. *Far Cry 3* was too, but was over the top. I think that *Far Cry 4* embraces black comedy, and that is something I'd want to keep, but I'd lean more into the systems. We're rubbing up more and more against the uncomfortable relationship between semilinear story and true emergent narrative, and I think *Far Cry 4* is the best expression of the latter, but we still have problems with the former. I would go even further in that direction – the story is *your* story. ∎

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Dragon Age: Inquisition

Dragon Age has always asked a lot of its players. The series began as a knowing tribute to the Infinity Engine RPGs that made BioWare's name; strategic complexity was in its DNA, as was a certain demand on your time. *Origins* was a completionist's game, deep and broad, less agile than *Mass Effect* but arguably smarter. Its sequel was the opposite. *Dragon Age II* hoped you'd care enough about its central drama that you'd not notice it all took place in the same room. It asked you to appreciate the realities of turning around a sequel against a publisher's ticking clock, which is an entirely different kind of demand.

Dragon Age: Inquisition is your reward for that half-decade journey if you made it, and the best argument you should do so if you haven't. This is a vast open-world RPG that borrows from *Skyrim*, *Assassin's Creed* and *The Witcher*, but matches that contribution with a heavy dose of BioWare's renowned ear for character and humanity. As a follow-up to both *Origins'* breadth and *Dragon Age II*'s wit, it's an out-and-out success.

Set ten years after the first game, *Inquisition* begins with an explosion that tears a hole in the 'veil' that separates reality from the realm of magic. Your character stumbles from this breach in the Fade with only a fuzzy memory of how they survived. Branded as a killer and apostate at first, and later as messiah, you're positioned as a complicating factor in the series-spanning conflict between mages and the Templars that police them, between Darkspawn and the Grey Wardens that seek to eradicate them, and between Thedas's fractious races. As the head of a new faction called the Inquisition, you're brought in to find answers and establish peace.

The main strength of *Inquisition*'s setup is that it places you in a position to interact with the entire *Dragon Age* narrative, including threads that have been left dangling since the original. Its weakness is that it asks you to absorb an enormous amount of information quickly. You can get by with a cursory understanding of what separates the Circle from the Chantry, but ideally you'll either already be familiar with this lore or willing to delve through conversation trees to uncover it.

This is a consequence of a game that wastes remarkably little time in introducing you to its open world. The Inquisition has a power rating independent of your party, and you spend this resource to unlock plot-advancing main missions. This mandates that you spend a certain amount of time building the order's reputation by exploring and completing sidequests, which are provided in MMOG-like quantities. Menial tasks such as gathering resources and hunting bandits can be hoovered up between objectives or ignored entirely, while seeking out and closing further Fade rifts underscores the Inquisition's role in the world. There are camps to establish, puzzles to complete, collectibles

Frostbite affords the game an extraordinary sense of place, particularly when it comes to the sight of a distant mountain

to find, and customisable keeps to capture and hold. Individually, few of the tasks here match the narrative complexity of their equivalents in previous games, but *Inquisition* aims for quantity, plus the sense of freedom imparted when you discover the world on your own.

So you can jump for the first time in this series, and explore vast zones in any direction you like — only a handful are linear. The Frostbite engine affords the game an extraordinary sense of place, particularly when it comes to the sight of a distant cliff or mountain range. Atmospheric lighting and environmental effects vastly exceed what *Dragon Age* has achieved before, and are used to great effect in conjunction with the dragon encounters that punctuate the open world.

And it's out in the world that you can gather the collectibles needed to upgrade the Inquisition's fortress in a dozen ways, down to the drapery, as well as find the materials to fuel a deep, modular crafting system. The game is potentially an obsessive completionist's nightmare, but min-maxing every map is optional this time around. The process of exploration is better on PC, however: using the mouse to discover objects to interact with feels natural, whereas its controller equivalent is a 'ping' system that highlights pickups in a radius around you. This forces your eye towards the ground, which is exactly where it doesn't belong.

Combat is another weakness, at least at first. Complexity comes slowly, even though you're given control over all four of your party members, and padded enemy health bars can leave you holding down the same button for minutes at a time as you wait for your auto-attack to do the job. Things improve as ability combos are unlocked and understood, but while the presentation is better, the series still doesn't manage to reconcile the readability and strategic depth of the first game with the action-RPG feel that it has subsequently sought. There are also visual glitches that occur just frequently enough to be a problem, such as NPCs clipping through walls, sitting on invisible chairs, and so on. This is a big enough game that it can bear these issues without hampering the whole too terribly, but it is a problem nonetheless.

These are, however, imperfections that fade into the background when you're faced with all the things that the game does so well. The scale of its landscapes and the powerful, varied drama of each main mission is matched by an attention to detail and character that is rare for this type of game, whether that's a deftly written conversation overheard as you walk between destinations or an in-character codex entry that makes you laugh. This is the most ambitious game BioWare has ever made because it operates on both the large scale and the small, where most RPGs pick one or the other. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* demands your time and attention, but it gives a lot in return, too.

8

ABOVE Frostbite's greatest gift to the series is draw distance. *Dragon Age* has always apparently taken place in mountainous expanses and misty lowlands; now it really does.
RIGHT Even without pausing or using the tactical menu, shortcuts are available to have your party focus their energy on a single target or disengage from combat

BELOW The Orlesian capital of Val Royeaux is one of the few cities in the game, and yet it doesn't spread beyond a few small hubs. Keeps and fortresses in the wilderness are, conversely, far more impressive
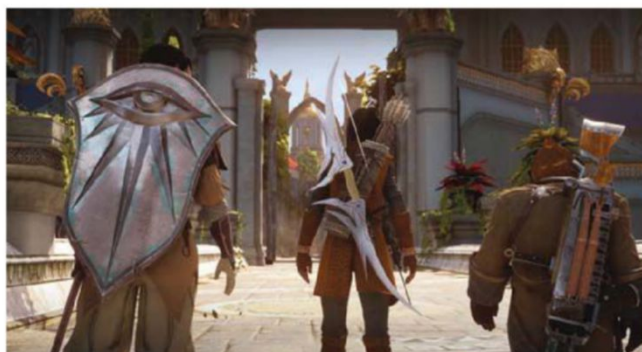
ABOVE Closing Fade rifts using the Inquisitor's unique power is a staple of the open world, along with establishing new camps for the Inquisition and hunting out the various collectibles scattered about these locales ▶

BioWare's cutscene craft has improved to the point that it can do with a gesture what would once need a line of dialogue

Post Script

BioWare sets the standard for representation in mainstream games

There's a notion sometimes peddled in the Internet's more reactive corners that inclusivity incurs an additional cost of some kind, a conservative view that holds that a gay character *must* be more expensive than a straight one or that a woman *must* be more expensive than a man. The root of many misguided comment-thread campaigns is the idea that providing a breadth of voices must mean a developer is somehow shutting others out, that identity is a zero-sum game where the straight, white male only stands to lose.

Dragon Age: Inquisition is a timely and necessary counter to this argument. It's a huge open-world game that nonetheless grants the player and the characters you meet a plurality of voices, genders, sexualities. As other studios wring their hands about letting you play as a woman, BioWare has turned up with four playable races, both genders, and four distinct voice options for its lead.

Six out of the nine principal players in the early part of the game are women — seven, if you choose to play as a female yourself. *Inquisition* not only passes the Bechdel test, it proves that it is eminently possible to do so without breaking a heroic narrative.

The companion roster includes gay characters, bisexual ones and people of colour; romantic characters, promiscuous characters and characters who reserve the right to express their sexuality. Vitally, the identities of your companions are not held in isolation from their mechanical and narrative role in the game. Instead they are folded together subtly, BioWare understanding that the *Dragon Age* setting is not Earth and does not need to inherit the same social prejudices.

Cole is one example. A lost spirit in the form of a young man, he sees emotions rather than people. He's not a mind reader per se, simply highly sensitive to the unhappiness of others — and he feels compelled to solve it, which you can either coach him through or discourage. He is in some ways a character that could only exist in a game that features spirits and demons, but could also be seen as a sensitive presentation of a young person somewhere on the autistic spectrum. You can read Cole either way, and this provides space for human perspectives that don't usually get a voice in games.

Another highlight comes when the Inquisitor has drinks with mercenaries under the command of Iron Bull. Bull's second-in-command, Krem, is a man you may determine to be transgender by his voice and somewhat feminine facial features.

In asking about this, the player is given a range of ways to approach the topic, from the naïve and mildly transphobic ('Why do you dress like a man?' 'Are you a woman?') to understanding ('Have you always known?'). Krem's identity is never the subject of doubt or joking, and he's supported by his companions and superiors, but the player is given the option to ask questions that could potentially educate them about the nature of transgender identity in general. Its seamless, well-written, touching.

This is where all that backstory can be turned to social purpose. Bull addresses the topic of Krem's gender, explaining that his people — the Qunari, who operate under a para-Confucian social contract called the Qun — would not perceive him as anything other than male. The Qun dictates social role according to individual facility (in this case, combat) and does not associate identity with sexual reproduction. In *Inquisition*, 'lore' is used to inform social commentary in a way that is natural, and enhances both.

To say that no other mainstream videogame studio is operating at this level is an understatement. *Inquisition* might be a technically advanced game, but its identity politics are — strikingly, almost sadly — its most futuristic feature. ■

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Assassin's Creed Unity

We're half an hour in, being chased through Versailles by a West Country blacksmith, when we head, sighing, to the audio settings. *Assassin's Creed* has long evoked a stronger sense of place when heard in its mother tongue, but never before has it felt like the only option. Our hero, Arno Dorian, should not sound like he has arrived fresh from a stint on Mr Selfridge; a Versailles blacksmith shouldn't seem like he's fresh off the boat from Taunton. French it is.

A few things are lost in translation, admittedly. Cutscenes have been built for English audio, so to play *Unity* in French is to undermine its current-gen-only visuals with PS1-era lip sync. And only principal dialogue is subtitled, so you'll miss out on a lot of incidental chatter. This has been part of the package ever since *ACII*, but it's never been so pronounced — *Unity*'s Revolutionary Paris is enormous, sure, but it's the density that hits you rather than the sprawl, with thronging crowds and tightly nestled buildings as far as the eye can see. There are modelled interiors, too, from the explorable townhouses in posh quarters to stacked apartments elsewhere. And it all looks delightful: remarkably lit, lovingly textured, impossibly detailed and teeming with life. *Unity*'s Paris is incredible, and sets a new standard for open worlds, if only in scope.

Execution, however, is another matter. At launch, discussion about the game centred mostly on performance issues, although we've witnessed only a handful of truly bizarre pieces of behaviour among the countless thousands of Parisians whose paths we've crossed. Naturally, experiences vary, but to many fellow players we've talked with, the game isn't as crippled by glitches as its memes suggest. Which is just as well, because there are plenty of problems elsewhere.

Dorian is the biggest of the lot. In a series that needs graceful heroes, he stands apart as a bumbling buffoon, a new traversal system making him the most unwieldy assassin to date. It's a decent concept — hold the right trigger to navigate horizontal space, press one button to make him go up, another to descend — that falters in practice, with too much overlap between the three systems. Try to escape a sword fight and Dorian may hop onto a gravestone; turn and scarper from a group of pursuers on the street and he could well clamber up a lamppost. He is confounded by windows, never entirely sure if you want him to go through them, above them, or simply to hop incessantly between the corners of Paris's many small balconies. A prompt that claims you can enter windows with L2 seems misleading at first and, later, like an outright lie. L2 also triggers stealth mode, a crouched stance in which Dorian retains his habit of hopping onto nearby furniture, while a one-button cover system somehow manages to be basic and botched at the same time. Dorian, like his forebears, has no problem staying out of sight outdoors, but when you

> There are some noble intentions here, almost all of them undermined by Ubisoft asking that you wrestle with a fool

PAID COMPANIONSHIP
Last year's *Assassin's Creed* companion app synced to a console running *Black Flag* and presented its map onscreen. It was a bit of player-focused thinking that runs entirely counter to *Unity*'s app, which retains that feature but also offers a game that pulls every trick in the mobile monetisation book. These span from *Candy Crush*-style invitations to buy extra turns after failing a puzzle to wait timers and health bars in the Nomad missions, which are based on the Brotherhood system from Ezio Auditore's like-titled outing. It's not even free – some features and upgrades are walled off unless you're prepared to pony up £1.49 – while the constant scanning for a console running *Unity* means it'll empty your battery as well your wallet.

do finally get him to go through a window, you might as well simply unsheathe your sword and get on with it.

Sadly, combat has never been weaker. Built around an *Arkham*-style counterattack system, there's an awkward pause between a parry and a follow-up, as if Dorian is surprised at his success. It's unresponsive, woolly, and lacking in finesse. It's also where *Unity*'s most calamitous problem is most often exposed. Framerates fluctuate from uncomfortable to unbearable, sometimes even dropping to single figures. Busy combat scenes are the most regular culprit — especially in the co-op missions, where the enemy count scales up — but even away from battle and without thousands of NPCs onscreen, you can expect frequent slideshows.

It becomes depressingly clear that *Unity* needed a few more months in the oven, yet there was somehow enough time for Ubisoft to make its standard morass of open-world busywork, and for the business development teams to work their dark magic. Certain chests are locked until you've played the companion app and others until you've levelled up in Initiates, which supposedly tracks progress across the *AC* oeuvre but has refused to recognise the presence of almost the entire series in our Uplay account, even *Unity* itself. Meanwhile, a premium currency speeds up progress through the new customisable loadout system, and you can buy melee or stealth boosts with microtransactions.

Assassin's Creed games have always been exercises in forgiveness. To enjoy them is to overlook their foibles: their combat and menial tasks, their lacklustre stories and mission designs, their modern-day guff. What is most frustrating is the obvious effort that has been made to address some of those long-standing flaws, and the extent to which that effort has been undermined by the loss of a critical few months of polish. Dorian, for all his blundering, is likeable; no Ezio Auditore, perhaps, but no Connor Kenway either. The story, while an unimaginative revenge tale, uses the Revolutionary period sparingly and well. Lose a target in a tailing mission and you can just track them down again, rather than reset to a checkpoint. There are some noble intentions here, almost all of them undermined by Ubisoft's refusal to put you in control of a hero, instead asking that you wrestle with a fool.

It was not so long ago that we praised Ubisoft for its willingness to delay big releases for the sake of quality. Clearly the buck stops at *Assassin's Creed*, which has become too important to the balance sheet to slip beyond Thanksgiving. The patching process has begun in earnest, and in the unlikely event that everything is fixed, this might rival the best this series has to offer. At release, it offers a staggeringly beautiful world filled with unfinished systems, ugly cash grabs, and a string of missed opportunities.

5

ABOVE Special mention must go to Ubisoft Montreal's fabrics. Love-interest -cum-sister-in-arms Elise has a finely detailed, lavishly bouncy hairstyle, too, though NPCs clearly don't have access to the same quality of product
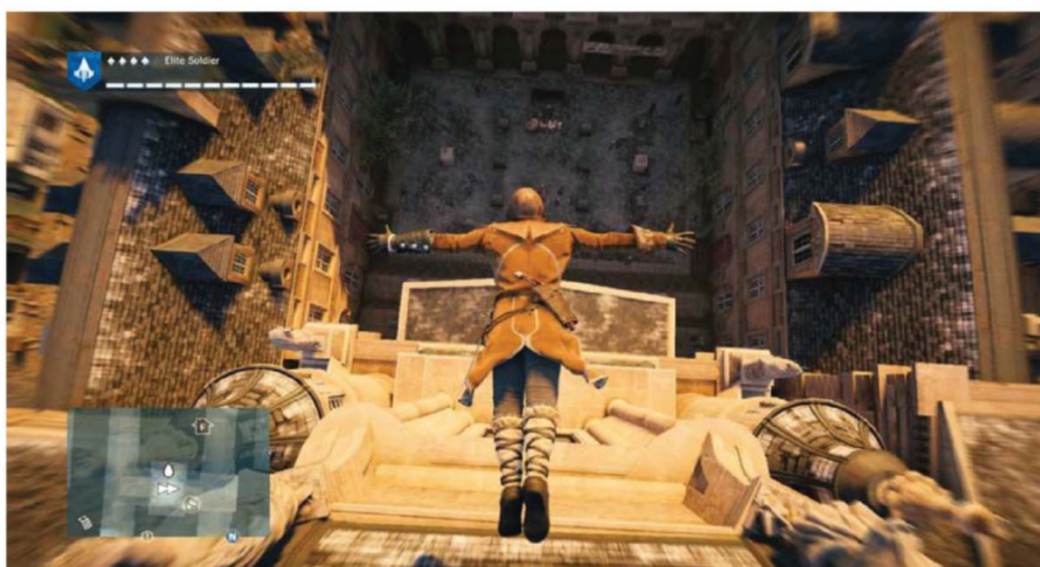
TOP Paris is too rich a setting to use in just one period, and *Unity* escapes the Revolution with Animus-invoked Rift sequences that transplant you to WWII, the Middle Ages and, here, France's golden age, the Belle Époque.
ABOVE Yes, this is a shot from a cutscene, but such sequences are produced using the same engine that powers everything else. When you resume control of Dorian, every one of those NPCs will still be there on the ground.
LEFT For all the fuss made of Dorian's new downward parkour system, a swan dive into a hay cart remains his most expedient means of descending from high altitudes. Expect little of the cinematic flair shown in demos and trailers as he makes his way back to terra firma

Assassin's Creed Rogue

Everything is permitted, or so goes the credo of the Assassins. Some way into *Rogue*, protagonist Shay Patrick Cormac will become convinced that having that much freedom isn't necessarily a good thing. And clearly Ubisoft agrees: upon beating up a group of thugs in a pub, we were invited to pay £200 for intelligence from the barkeeper. Except we couldn't. Instead, an onscreen message demanded that we, "Progress further until the barkeeper can give you intelligence."

'Progress further' is an all-too-common barrier here, though as with most of *Assassin's Creed*'s contrivances, it can be explained — if not excused — by the Animus's idiosyncrasies. Once again, Ubisoft uses the virtual-reality device to frame the historical drama, this time casting you as an employee of Abstergo exploring the glitched memories of the aforesaid Irishman, an Assassin turned Templar. Cormac should be one of the more intriguing playable characters to date, and his arc has real potential, though his voice actor delivers a curiously flat performance, with an accent that only occasionally lands in the vicinity of the Emerald Isle.

Before he switches sides, Cormac seems happy in his role as an amalgam of Connor and Edward Kenway, but while you'll revisit some of the settings of the third numbered *AC* game, *Rogue* has much more in common with *Black Flag*. Except that rather than sailing around the Caribbean, you're steering your ship through the Appalachian Valley and North Atlantic, slicing through ice and harpooning narwhals as you go.

The Morrigan might have a shallower draft than The Jackdaw, but they handle pretty much identically. In other words, your ship's far more manoeuvrable than a vessel of her size should be, yet the sailing still carries a pleasing weight. Again, your adventures out at sea compare favourably to your exploits on land. You can set alight a trail of oil to deter pursuers, though you'll rarely need to flee, not least because you can create damaging waves by ramming or shooting icebergs, while a puckle gun allows you to target weakpoints with deadly efficacy. You can use these tools to thin out enemy numbers before boarding a stricken ship, whereupon you can add another craft to your growing fleet, repair the Morrigan, or simply pocket the loot.

It's variations on a theme, then, with only contextual differences to distinguish *Rogue* from its predecessor. That's no surprise: it's clear that *Unity* was Ubisoft's focus this year, even if its technical woes would suggest otherwise, and that the publisher's Sofia studio was working to a stringent budget here. Beyond the obvious reuse of assets, there are some noticeably rough edges to the presentation, and it's a little too frequently apparent that the framerate has been left uncapped.

Still, the developer's prudence has to be admired at times. It's surely the shortest *AC* campaign to date, but as a result it cuts to the chase: your training is

It would be wrong to dismiss the pleasure of the open seas, but even here you're beholden to your activities on dry land

completed within 15 minutes, when *ACIII* waited until the 17th mission. Quests are briskly paced, and thus more replayable, and when Cormac eventually becomes a Templar, the previous games' multiplayer component is skilfully repurposed. Use Eagle Vision and you'll see the familiar circular radar highlighting Assassins in pursuit, their whispers getting louder as they approach.

It's a pity the corner cutting extends to the story. At one stage, Cormac is so badly injured he can barely make it downstairs. Immediately afterwards, he brawls with two men, then chases another across the rooftops. And his shift in allegiances isn't as organic as it might have been. The seeds of doubt are never sown. Instead, the pivotal moment is a single, breathless set-piece, which introduces a brand-new location only to immediately tear it apart.

It's also a moment that highlights the inherent weaknesses of the series' foundations. Despite its strong visual impact, this sequence is a glorified QTE: throughout, you're doing nothing more than holding the right trigger and pushing up on the analogue stick, occasionally veering left and right to avoid hazards, while text prompts urge you to keep moving forward, as if your objective was in any doubt. *Rogue* casts you as an explorer, yet its asides are little more than a series of checkboxes to tick off. This time your shopping list includes war letters, totems, Animus fragments, cave paintings, Viking sword fragments and more.

In theory, Templar artefacts require more effort than walking to a waypoint. Each map is a hand-drawn image of a location with an X marking the spot, though it also tells you the precise coordinates, meaning there's no challenge in digging up your reward. Or rather, part of it: there's a weary sense of inevitability to the reminder that you'll need to collect all 24 to claim your prize.

It's symptomatic of a series so concerned that its players might not be enjoying themselves that the idea of affording them the freedom to discover things is no longer a consideration. It would be wrong to dismiss the pleasure of the open seas, but even here you're beholden to your activities on dry land, requiring the money from your growing property empire to fund improvements to The Morrigan, and the hares and foxes needed for crafting protective gear and weapon pouches.

Assuming you're simply content with content, Ubisoft busies you with donkey work. And so once more you synchronise, seeking out that same tree on every island with the broken trunk you can sprint up, just so you can lengthen your to-do list. Even as the ocean stretches out in front of you, you can feel the insistent pull of the publisher's hand. The idea that nothing is off limits is a promise this game has absolutely no interest in keeping; in *Assassin's Creed Rogue*, everything is restricted.

6

RIGHT *Rogue* assumes a familiarity with the convoluted *AC* narrative. One scene-stealing cameo in particular will make you wonder why you've been saddled with a much less intriguing character.
MAIN You'll occasionally be given the chance to deploy poisonous gas, usually by sabotaging a nearby barrel. Conveniently, it spreads out in a perfectly neat circle, though Cormac will need to don his mask to breathe while enemies splutter.
BOTTOM Though the scenery is pretty, *Rogue* sometimes struggles to frame its combat. At times, especially during busier encounters, you'll be asked to fight enemies that have sneakily manoeuvred away from the camera's gaze

ABOVE *Rogue* is the most gun-happy *AC* to date, with Cormac's arsenal including an air rifle and even a grenade launcher. If you favour a quieter approach, you can load it with sleep bombs rather than shrapnel grenades

Super Smash Bros For Wii U

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Sora Ltd/Bandai Namco
Format Wii U
Release Out now

Well, it's been almost 13 years, but *Super Smash Bros Melee* can finally be laid to rest: *Smash Wii U* feels that good. That it finds a sweet spot between pacy, deep brawling and broad party appeal is remarkable, but to do so consistently across a roster of 50-odd characters, and so many wildly different playstyles, is astonishing. Yes, it's built on the same core ideas that have powered the series since 12 fighters duked it out on N64's crude platforms, but here they're refined to ingots of explosive, impulsive pugilism bound in a gloriously crisp and colourful HD wrapper, *Brawl*'s pratfalls left behind as slag.

Smash is often labelled as a fighting game, but it's so atypical as to stretch the category, or even break out of it. It tests some of the same skills — reading fighters, controlling space — but its heart is usually lighter, ditching complex combo inputs and instead setting up scrabbles for a Poké Ball, say, which could either produce a legendary to wipe the stage clear of foes or, tragicomically, a Goldeen to flop uselessly about. It is about reacting to background chaos as much as honing abilities and your metagame.

Smash Wii U doubles down on both sides of its nature, pushing the boundaries farther out into the serious and the silly. Eightplayer Smash mode is anarchic carnage, skill hard to express when you're facing attacks from three directions, but the handful of large stages split the pack into boisterous pockets of flailing limbs that suit a room full of lightly competitive friends. Online one-on-one, meanwhile, gets as close to traditional fighting games as *Smash* ever will without a reboot, its Omega form stages dropping the phase shifts and tricks of standard platforms, and items banned altogether to ensure a balletic dance of reactions, counters and specials decides the victor.

Thanks to the lithe way fighters move, both ends of the scale are excellent, and with an array of input devices supported, *Smash* has never been so flexible. Custom control setups could be easier to deal with, though — you'll have to reselect them after every mode switch, online and off, which is easy to forget until your rebound special hops you into the air.

Not every addition is for the better, either. The new Smash Tour joins the 3DS version's Smash Run on the list of modes to rinse for unlocks and then leave alone for evermore. It's a fast-moving but still drawn-out affair of rolling dice and moving about a board to collect stat boosts and characters for a royal rumble at the end. Short-lived bouts are sandwiched in, too, but since trophy items doled out at random can add 100 per cent damage to a player or make you metal from the off, they're hilariously unbalanced.

Classic, meanwhile, marks an encore for *Smash 3DS*'s excellent difficulty slider, letting you bet gold to up the challenge and the rewards. The difference is it puts you

in a freeform arena of matchup choices rather than on a variable path, but the addition of scraps with more than four fighters is questionable. One unlucky hit can mean getting batted from CPU to CPU, which is nothing like as amusing as it is among friends, though you do soon learn to hang back and mop up, especially when a perfect 9.0-difficulty run is on the line.

Crazy and Master Hand challenges, plus the return of Event matches and All-Star mode, make up the difference for the lone player. The foremost are particularly good. Here, some damage persists between each match — beat a metal opponent, a giant or a round of free-for-all — but your wins are totted up. You can end the run in a showdown with Crazy Hand at any point, but the rewards will swell with each victory. Conversely, lose and you can kiss goodbye to almost the lot. Its one-more-try nature can gobble up hours. And if the package is a little heavily dependant on its staple activity in places, lacking an equivalent of Subspace Emissary to break up the rhythm, Events allow Sora's imagination to run wild, changing the rules of engagement in delectable morsels. You'll hop from an HP-based duel between Lucina and Marth to a *Wrecking Crew* building demolition to a Luigi-on-Bowser showdown where Mario threatens to come and steal the show if you can't finish in time. Such sublime inversions of series norms are what *Smash* does best.

Online has been far spottier historically, and while *Smash Wii U*'s netcode is a vast improvement, it's not flawless. Much is dependant on connection quality, but a bad line can hamper framerates for all involved, the game slowing down like you're viewing it through a lazily spun zoetrope. Happily, such cases are rare, and the odds are even better with a smaller player count. Hours of flawless one-on-one matches on a rural connection would seem to deny either side the opportunity to blame many losses on lag.

What does Amiibo add to all this? That depends on what you put into them. Most modes preclude use of the figures, so they're nonessential at best, but the capacity to learn a few tricks, plus to feed them customisation items, does create fighters decidedly different to a level-nine NPC.

Nintendo promised to refocus on its stalwart fans recently, and while the launch game for a plastic toy range seems like an odd place to begin, Sakurai and co have managed to do exactly that. This series has always been a peerless act of fan service anyway, but *Smash Wii U* welds tight, technical play to endearing chaos more seamlessly than any game in the series before it. It's another highlight of Wii U's slow recovery year, and while a smattering of minor blemishes mean it shines a bit less brightly than 2014's other headline acts, it's no less essential for it.

8

> *Smash Wii U doubles down on both sides of its nature, pushing the boundaries further into the serious and silly*

CHALLENGER APPROACHING
Smash Wii U's cast additions may not all be able to rely on the star power of its veterans, but it's amazing how many variations in playstyle they offer. Rosalina and Luma are sure to do well on the tier lists, since high-level players can use the pair's ability to split up a short distance to cover more ground. Little Mac has some devastating lunges and punches, plus a damage-charged KO attack, but that's offset by a rubbish air game. The Duck Hunt Duo is also a favourite, attacking with a beak flurry or lobbing clay pigeons for an offscreen lightgun to shoot, though finally being able to land a hit on the dog is even more cathartic.

RIGHT Final Smashes continue to offer scene-stealing spectacle, and are especially incredible in HD. Pac-Man sates his hunger, turning gobbled fighters into familiar eyeballs, but every last one is an act of flamboyant homage.
BELOW There's so much to do in the game that the customisation options are easy to overlook, but the Mii Fighters provide an all-purpose outlet for the hats and costumes you earn through play.
MAIN Engineering wavedashing and L-cancelling out may upset some, but *Smash Wii U* doesn't feel any lesser for the absence of such techniques, rewarding technical skill with the ability to really punish weak defences

ABOVE Palutena, Pit and Dark Pit make up the Angel Land contingent. The goddess prefers to attack from a distance, blasting fighters with her staff. If that doesn't work, she can also smash them away with wings of light

Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker

Nintendo has never lost the knack of creating digital playgrounds that feel like they could exist in material form — as a former toymaker, that shouldn't come as a surprise. But while its worlds have always felt solid and tangible on some level, rarely has it crafted something with as much tactility as the dioramas in *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker*. Even if they had no other function, these stages would have value as objects to simply admire. Suspended impossibly in an infinite sky, they're beautifully formed; they're a little too chunky to be decorative, perhaps, but demonstrate once again that Nintendo applies the same rigour to the construction of its levels as to its robust hardware. If *Treasure Tracker*'s stages were to suddenly plummet earthwards, you can be sure they'd bounce.

That sensation of physicality is important, because it forms a large part of this game's appeal. You'll hear a succession of gentle clicks as you rotate the camera with the right stick. In concert with the gyro sensor, it's as if you're turning each stage over in your hands while peering inquisitively around it, even if the permanently enabled tilt function forces you to keep the controller steady at all other times. As such, there is a slight disconnect when playing on the TV screen, but when gazing down instead at the GamePad display, what comes to mind is Fireproof Games' *The Room*, since both titles offer a similar feeling of examining a complicated object with many moving parts.

The main difference, of course, is that here you're in direct control of one of those parts, Captain Toad waddling adorably around as you move the left stick in search of the three gems and single Power Star on each stage. The right analogue stick is just as regularly employed as you shift your viewpoint to keep the Captain in clear sight during perilous situations, or to scrutinise his surroundings from all angles when he's in a safe place, teasing out routes and secrets that might be obscured from your current perspective.

The story presents a welcome subversion of the Mushroom Kingdom kidnap scenario, too. Toadette may be whisked away at the outset, but only as a result of her bravery, since she courageously clings onto the first Power Star when a giant bird carries it off. And once the first 18-level chapter is over, there's a neat reversal of roles: Toadette becomes playable, and must rescue the Captain. As an established idea given a fresh twist, it's in keeping with the design ethos of the game — beside a handful of features, and a sprinkling of new enemies, almost everything here comes from *Super Mario 3D World*. There are Chargin' Chucks and Beep Blocks, Clear Pipes and Conkdors, Double Cherries and Flip Panels. The cackling doppelgängers that pursued you in *3D Land* and *Galaxy 2* are repurposed into Toad-shaped mummified spectres. There's an art to such thrift, but for the most part these assets are skilfully recycled.

> You experience the occasional quiet epiphany, but they never arrive as frequently as you might hope

Few, however, will welcome the return of the platforms activated by blowing into the GamePad mic, not least because there's no button alternative here. And given the already strong physical connection to the world here, there's no good excuse for more touchscreen gimmickry, such as when a translucent wheel appears, inviting you to circle your finger to rotate a bridge into position. Rare transitions into firstperson fare better: occasionally you'll climb into a turnip cannon to break blocks or topple Goomba towers. Gyroscopic aiming is also employed during three on-rails minecart stages. It helps to have a partner watching the TV to spot hidden gems, though as with most levels, two runs should be enough to find everything.

And thus we come to perhaps *Treasure Tracker*'s most significant failing: for long stretches it's simply too easy. A gentle learning curve is to be expected from the modern Nintendo work, but for an action game, hazards are all too easily avoided. Ambling Shy Guys are quickly lost or taken down by a turnip plucked from the ground, while birds that ground pound when you pass below are too slow to present any real peril. Meanwhile, the puzzle-led stages aren't quite devious enough. You'll experience the occasional quiet epiphany, but they never arrive as frequently as you might hope.

Happily, it transpires that EAD Tokyo is playing the long game. The final chapter is the equivalent to *3D World*'s late-game blowout, introducing fresh wrinkles and increasing the threat level. One stage forces you to climb to escape a rising tide; another pushes you into a constant sprint down treacherously narrow paths; yet another asks you to plan your advance carefully, lest you be left without a return route. Old bosses return with new tricks, while optional objectives encourage you to reconsider your approach. And one or two stages will leave you confounded, even if it's only for a short while.

An unfortunate side effect of this shift is that *Treasure Tracker* loses a little of what made it special in the first place. Whereas at times you can happily ignore the fact that you've seen most of these elements before, at others you're all but playing a *Mario* game minus a jump button. The inclusion of bonus stages lifted from *3D World* — with ladders and pipes to allow the Captain to cross gaps — are a definite misstep, because they only encourage unfavourable comparisons. Conducted at the Captain's leisurely stroll, they're oddly dull.

You're left with a sensation we rarely associate with finishing a Nintendo game: that this a fine idea, but it's one that's a touch underdeveloped. There's much to admire and to enjoy, but we've come to expect more from a developer of EAD Tokyo's calibre. If *Captain Toad* is to keep on tracking, we hope he has to work harder next time; he has access to plenty of treasures here, but they're a little too easily unearthed.
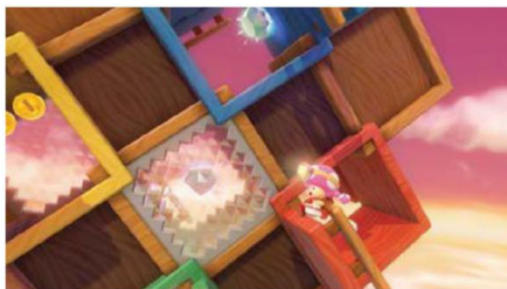
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TOP The ability to move the camera precludes the kind of Escher-esque trickery seen in *Monument Valley*, though it's unlike Nintendo to miss a trick. A few stages with a fixed perspective seem an obvious twist.
MAIN The more inventive ideas introduced in later stages may leave you crying out for more. Amiibo compatibility will likely offer extra content; we're hoping for something akin to *New Super Mario Bros 2*'s challenge packs.
RIGHT Collect all the gems and complete all of the optional objectives on every stage in a chapter and you've got one more reason to go back: on the level select screen, you'll be given a challenging par time to beat

Escape Dead Island

Like the bodies of its reanimated inhabitants, *Escape Dead Island* is a disconcerting mess. Fatshark's thirdperson, cel-shaded entry in the *Dead Island* series never settles on what type of game it wants to be, let alone manages to deliver a consistent standard of quality. And despite its name and some entirely throwaway backstory, it's difficult to see how *Escape* fits into the series, or even who it's aimed at.

What's clear from the start is that something has gone horribly wrong. The game begins with you in control of flamboyant Russian samurai Kilo Two, who's in the process of infiltrating the Geopharm facility on the island of Narapela, located just a few miles from the setting of the original, Banoi. Any enthusiasm you might share with the confident agent is soon eroded as the patronising tutorial slowly unveils *Escape's* sluggish controls and indistinct combat. Despite supposedly being a highly trained martial artist, Kilo Two moves with such lethargy that it's like he's already reached the conclusion the game's not worth bothering with. He might be on to something.

The knee-high obstructions that define your painfully linear route through the labs prove too much for him as well; all he can muster is a resigned crouch so as to fit through some conveniently placed gaps at an even slower pace. That crouch also doubles up as a stealth move, enabling you to sneak up on a docile or dining zombie before violently rupturing its carotid artery. Like many of *Escape's* other components, the concept behind this mechanic is initially promising, but flatfooted implementation sees it come up short. Every stealth kill plays out in exactly the same way, forcing you to watch the overlong animation each time, and almost every opportunity is presented in the form of a static zombie with their back to you.

Combat is at least slightly more involved. Strong and weak attacks are complemented by a vague dodge move that may or may not get you out of danger, and you can also shove zombies or jog towards them at half pelt and barge them to the ground, giving you the option to initiate another lingering animation as you execute them in exactly the same way, regardless of which weapon you're wielding at the time. There are no combos to be unearthed from this sparse setup, the only real skill required being your ability to prioritise threats or time your slower strong attack to coincide with the small window in which an enemy is staggered.

All of this disappointment comes in the opening few minutes, but there's much worse to come. Kilo Two is just a bit part, it transpires, and for the majority of the game you will instead be lumbered with the even less capable, and utterly charmless, Cliff Calo. Faced with a disapproving media mogul father, the aspiring journalist and self-confessed 'douche' does what anyone seeking to gain professional respect would do: steals his father's

Publisher Deep Silver
Developer Fatshark
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

Despite the name and some backstory, it's difficult to see how Escape fits into the series, or even who it's aimed at

luxury yacht with the help of two friends in an attempt to get the scoop on the events that happened at Banoi. Upon arriving, the boat mysteriously explodes and your hunt for evidence begins. The game, having failed at thirdperson brawling and sneaking, now aims its fumblings in the direction of open worlds.

Other than a few invisible walls and locked doors, Narapela is open in the sense that you can move about it at your leisure, but you shouldn't expect to find anything of interest away from the critical path. The handholding that stifles the prologue remains in force, with Fatshark mistaking constant backtracking between rigidly defined objectives for open-world play. There's little to see on the way, either, the island's handful of small areas linked by tedious cave networks or service tunnels that are made all the more excruciating by the sheer amount of ducking and crawling that's required to get through them.

You won't encounter any enemies in these transitional spaces, but there aren't many more to be found in the open areas, either. Encounters mostly number three or four undead, many of which can simply be dashed past. Fatshark ramps up the enemy count slightly during setpieces, but also tends to throw in an awkward difficulty spike for good measure. You'll be introduced to The Butcher — a hardy, fast-moving creature that can block attacks with his devastating claws and also regenerates health with disheartening rapidity — with little warning after having flailed your way through predominantly ineffectual foes up until that point. Matters aren't helped by your own vague health system, which simply reddens the screen as you take damage but never gives a consistent impression of how close to death you are. And when you do start falling to the undead, the game's miserly checkpointing is revealed, often dumping you in the middle of one of those hateful crawl spaces from a while back.

Fatshark attempts to introduce another element to *Escape* in the form of what we presume were meant to be unsettling hallucinations. You might see freight containers falling from the sky, for example, or undergo the incredibly irritating inversion of both your view and controls when you enter a room. The idea of questioning the lead character's handle on reality is a good one, but one that *Escape*, already trembling under the weight of its shortcomings, simply cannot support.

Occasionally, a scenario or location promises to be something more, offering a glimpse of a game that might have been worth your time. Without fail, however, that fleeting sensation is quickly unravelled by ill-judged design decisions and the stodgy controls. *Escape's* one resounding achievement, it seems, is that it has somehow managed to be an even poorer game than *Dead Island: Riptide*.

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RIGHT You rarely feel in control during a fight, the spongy feedback created by slow response times and indistinct collision detection ensuring scraps degenerate into flailing with your fingers crossed.
MAIN Xian Mei, one of the four playable characters in other *Dead Island* games, gets a supporting role, offering you guidance over a radio link. While she never says anything interesting, anything's better than listening to Calo quip.
BOTTOM Calo's hallucinations grow in frequency as *Escape Dead Island* progresses and are by far the most interesting thing about the game. However, the overall quality is such that they're not set too high a bar

ABOVE Despite what this may suggest, the crafting system from previous games doesn't reappear – instead, you find pre-made weapons along the way. While they look different, however, they all feel the same in combat

This War Of Mine

We can hear the cries of a woman being raped by a soldier behind the bombed-out supermarket we're searching. We thought about intervening when we saw him take her, at gunpoint, to the now-locked storage container out back, but we're unarmed and there are three others back at our shelter waiting for our return, two of whom haven't eaten in days. The supermarket is empty now, so we can gather as much food as will fit in our bag and scarper.

On a different night, we enter the home of an elderly couple in our search for medical supplies. The husband sends his wife upstairs to hide and then follows us, pleading to be left alone as we rifle through their cupboards without a word, taking everything that looks useful. Many games promise tough moral choices, but very few deliver as ferociously as *This War Of Mine*.

The game's unflinching depiction of wartime suffering is particularly unsettling in a medium that commonly focuses on pyrotechnics and headshots. That's not to say combat is absent from 11 Bit Studios' game, but it's very much a last, desperate resort and one that can have far-reaching consequences. While the supply runs you undertake each night might target abandoned or poorly defended locations, they could equally take you to militia-occupied warehouses, gang-run brothels or even a military base. Get into a scuffle with someone wielding a knife or a gun and you're likely to come off worse. And even if you survive the encounter itself, a deep wound will kill in a matter of days if you can't find any bandages.

Minimising your chances of acquiring a puncture wound means sneaking around dangerous locales and managing the amount of noise you make. Clicking on a location once will make your party member tread softly, but slowly, towards it, while double-clicking will make them break into a noisier run. The amount of noise you're making is depicted by a shockwave that radiates from your character as you move around, one that grows to nerve-racking proportions if you need to shift rubble to clear a path or bust into a cupboard with a crowbar.

You're not the only thing making noise, of course, and movement elsewhere is revealed by smaller red circles. It might be just a rat, but it could be somebody else. You'll need to pay close attention to such warning signs, since building interiors are obscured by a fuzzy shroud only cut through by your line of sight. Peeking through keyholes will provide a limited view of the next room before you enter it, but doors left open will alert others to your presence. Cubby-holes provide a place to hide if you need to, but if you're discovered you can also take cover behind door frames as you try to escape (especially useful if you've found or made a gun).

But while some people will attack on sight, many potential aggressors will issue several warnings to leave,

> Many games promise tough moral choices, but very few deliver as ferociously as This War Of Mine

TEAM PLAYERS
Every character has a particular skill that can help you survive, adding variety and ensuring that subsequent playthroughs remain a challenge. Bruno is a good cook, so he uses less water, meat and fuel when preparing meals, while Katia has excellent bargaining skills, which means you can get a lot more for the items you decide to trade. Marko, meanwhile, can carry much more than other people, making him an ideal choice for scavenging missions so long as he is well rested. But the gameplay-focused decision to limit players to taking only one character out each night can feel arbitrary, especially when the party's desperate.

or stop stealing, before they attack you. You won't know how short someone's fuse is until you approach them — a risky proposition in a city achingly in need of food and supplies, but a demonstration of the uncommon nuance built into this game. That attention to detail is also reflected in the characters you control — a party of survivors, up to a maximum of five strong, selected randomly at the start of each game — who all have their own motivations and moral codes. Ignore the pleas of a starving homeless man in an abandoned tenement while controlling charitable former musician Zlata, for instance, and her mood will worsen in the days after the encounter, making her significantly less productive if you can't find a way to cheer her up.

Managing everyone's wellbeing is just as crucial as scavenging for supplies, then, and between nighttime sorties you'll spend the daylight hours upgrading your shelter (a large, but mortar-damaged, building) and keeping everyone in good spirits and good health. Building a stove to cook food is essential, and you'll need to think about heaters as the winter months approach, but equally important is ensuring that the group has enough chairs to sit on, a radio so they can listen out for news of an impending ceasefire, and books to help escape their ordeal until then — or, depressingly, burn when there's no other fuel to hand.

Almost every furnishing you build can be further upgraded — stoves, for example, become more fuel efficient — and you can also manufacture traps to try to catch rats for food or create weapons and other tools, all assuming you've come by the necessary parts. If somebody's particularly forlorn, you can get another survivor to give them a pep talk; if they've fallen ill, you must ensure they get plenty of rest and eat well. Medicine will also help speed along recovery if you can find any and haven't been raided or traded it for food during a particularly desperate patch. In among the agonising drama, there are echoes of *The Sims*.

But for all the hard decisions and harrowing consequences it makes you face, *This War Of Mine* is lifted by the contrasting acts of humanity and warmth that pop up across the duration of its nameless war. For example, the simple pleasure offered by a good book or the moral satisfaction of deciding to give medical supplies to the ailing hospital without asking for anything in exchange are all reflected in the diary entries of each character and, more importantly, in you as a player. Each small flicker of hope in a seemingly hopeless situation feels disproportionately rewarding, and the sense of elation at discovering a stash of food that will make the difference between surviving another night or another three is palpable. Presenting such affecting light and shade without moralising is no small feat, but your journey through *This War Of Mine*'s conflict will be all the more personal for it.

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LEFT Although you'll start out with good intentions, it's difficult to survive without harming, or at least endangering, other people. **BELOW** While the game has no tutorial, small hints are offered through the conversations and thoughts of your party members. **MAIN** While your base is initially a rubble-strewn shell, you're able to make it feel more like home by gradually patching up holes in the walls and adding furniture. Parties of raiders may come in the night, so ensuring security is essential

ABOVE Every character has an ongoing biography, which is updated with their thoughts as well as snippets of their story. Keeping an eye on how they feel is vital: depressed party members may simply refuse to move
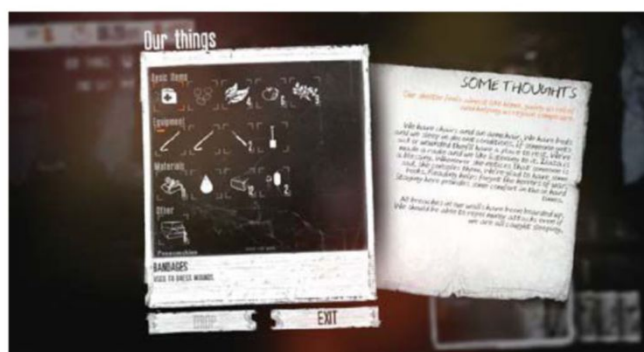
Never Alone

F ittingly for a modern retelling of a story about an odd couple, *Never Alone* operates on two very different levels. The first is as a vehicle for a life-affirming fable from a culture that has survived 4,000 years in one of the least hospitable environments on Earth: Arctic Alaska. This is a cultural artefact, and to engage with that is to be enriched. The other level, however, is as a rudimentary platformer with a number of foibles. Much like battling the savage winds that beat against the playable duo of Iñupiaq hunter Nuna and her arctic fox companion, the effort going in here feels like it deserves to result in far more progress than is made.

It does, however, look the part. Framed by vignetting and jet-black Arctic waters, these wastes of hard-packed snow and treacherous ice put other frozen videogame landscapes to shame. A section on the floes captures the gravitas of sea ice perfectly, towering structures of translucent purity reflecting light in mesmerising ways. Ruddy-cheeked Nuna is no less of an achievement, her coat's furs living brushstrokes that flap in blizzards. *Never Alone* communicates the harsh realities that shaped its mythic tale like few works before it.

If only the gameplay were as accomplished. The pacing is a mess: light puzzles that usually involve

The artistry goes a long way in helping the fable hit home, and in co-op the bond between the fox and girl can be powerful. A late difficulty spike might stop the younger part of its audience making it to the end, however

NATURAL HABITAT
Finding owls throughout the story unlocks short documentary clips where modern-day Iñupiaq talking heads give insight into the intricacies of their home and subsistence lifestyle as well as the more fantastic and spiritual elements at play here. The studio is so keen for you to watch these that it reminds you about them at every chance it gets, but they are well worth dipping into if you want to better understand the beliefs that underpin this tale, and they add value to the whole.

finding and gently manipulating friendly spirits to make new platforms encourage a meditative approach that's punctured by scrabbles through crushing ice structures, inelegant leaps of faith, and no fewer than five chases. Nuna is slow and the collision detection on her ledge clamber is clunky, further thwarting fluid progress.

Things gets worse when you play solo: the AI that takes control of whoever you aren't controlling is inconsistent, sometimes able to keep up and at others needing rescuing, and all too prone to taking ill-judged leaps to its doom. If either hero dies, it's back to the checkpoint. Your third and fourth partner-driven restarts seriously undermine the sense of attachment between kindred spirits on which the story is based.

And for a game so adept at communicating the feel of its homeland, it is poor at telling you what it wants of you as a player. For instance, spirits are only revealed in the immediate vicinity of the fox, and more than a few segments revolve around positioning it to create a path for Nuna. But points where the invisible tether between the pair can be stretched are never telegraphed, leading to spells of needless bafflement.

All of which means *Never Alone* is a fragile container for a tale of such inestimable value, and what ought to be universally welcoming instead must be approached with caution: come expecting revelation on an emotional level, not a mechanical one.

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Pokémon Omega Ruby/Alpha Sapphire

Hoenn was and still is the most divisive *Pokémon* region to date, though perhaps not for much longer. Peculiar and distinctive — well, as peculiar and distinctive as individual *Pokémon* games get — it's surely the most environmentally diverse world of them all, with a nonlinear critical path and a menagerie as unusual and wide-ranging as its profusion of activities.

Whichever version you choose, you'll be kept similarly busy. You'll collect volcanic ash to make glass flutes, choose whether to dress a cosplaying Pikachu as a scientist, rock star or Mexican wrestler, and explore vast stretches of water from above and beneath the surface. And though the story deals with a familiar eco-terrorist threat, it takes some unexpected turns, such as the moment when two fathers discuss their mixed emotions as their offspring head out into the world.

You'll also find some of the series' most adventurous and outlandish creature designs to date. Hoenn is home to the *Pokémon* universe's misfits and oddballs, from the bizarre Loudred to the comical Ludicolo. Improved animation makes them more characterful still, and the same applies to the wider range of Mega Evolved monsters. It's a pity, then, that *X* and *Y*'s technical foibles persist. Again, stereoscopy is restricted, and the

The soundtrack is another highlight. Those who played the original *Ruby* and *Sapphire* will marvel at some of the remixed melodies on offer here, and the battle music might just be the best of any *Pokémon* game yet

SOAR POINT
Game Freak may well be tired of fielding questions about a fully open-world *Pokémon* game, but in a late-game addition it gives us a tantalising glimpse of how one might look. Once you've obtained either Latios or Latias, you'll be able to take to the skies, gliding above Hoenn in a manner akin to *Pilotwings*. Not only is it an entertaining method of fast travel, but also an opportunity to access Mirage Spots, airborne anomalies from which you can obtain rare items or battle Legendary beasts.

game suffers from dropped frames when you are able to use it. Nonetheless, the thrill of battle is amplified by the dramatic presentation, with gyms, contests and other events capturing a sense of pageantry.

Meanwhile, should investors question Nintendo's reluctance to consider mobile gaming, Iwata might be advised to wryly point them in the direction of the DexNav, a device that heartily embraces the smartphone ethos. As in *X* and *Y*, you've got apps with which to train, pet and feed your team at any time, while the returning Player Search System offers easy connections to local or online players for battles or trades. A new feature allows you to track hidden Pokémon, however, and these beasts are often blessed with superior stats or with moves usually only available via breeding.

Offering easier access to better monsters isn't the only sop to seasoned players. The story has been streamlined to hurry veterans through to its conclusion, a process eased by the early arrival of the Experience Share and faster levelling overall. Collectors are alerted when each Pokémon in a given route has been snared, with silhouettes of any missing monsters on view otherwise. And with a more substantial endgame that sees other regions' inhabitants join the fun, these are the most generous entries since *HeartGold* and *SoulSilver* — trips down memory lane that double as excellent entry points for budding trainers.

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You are challenged by
Pokémon Trainer Zinnia!

Now it's on a collision course
with our planet!
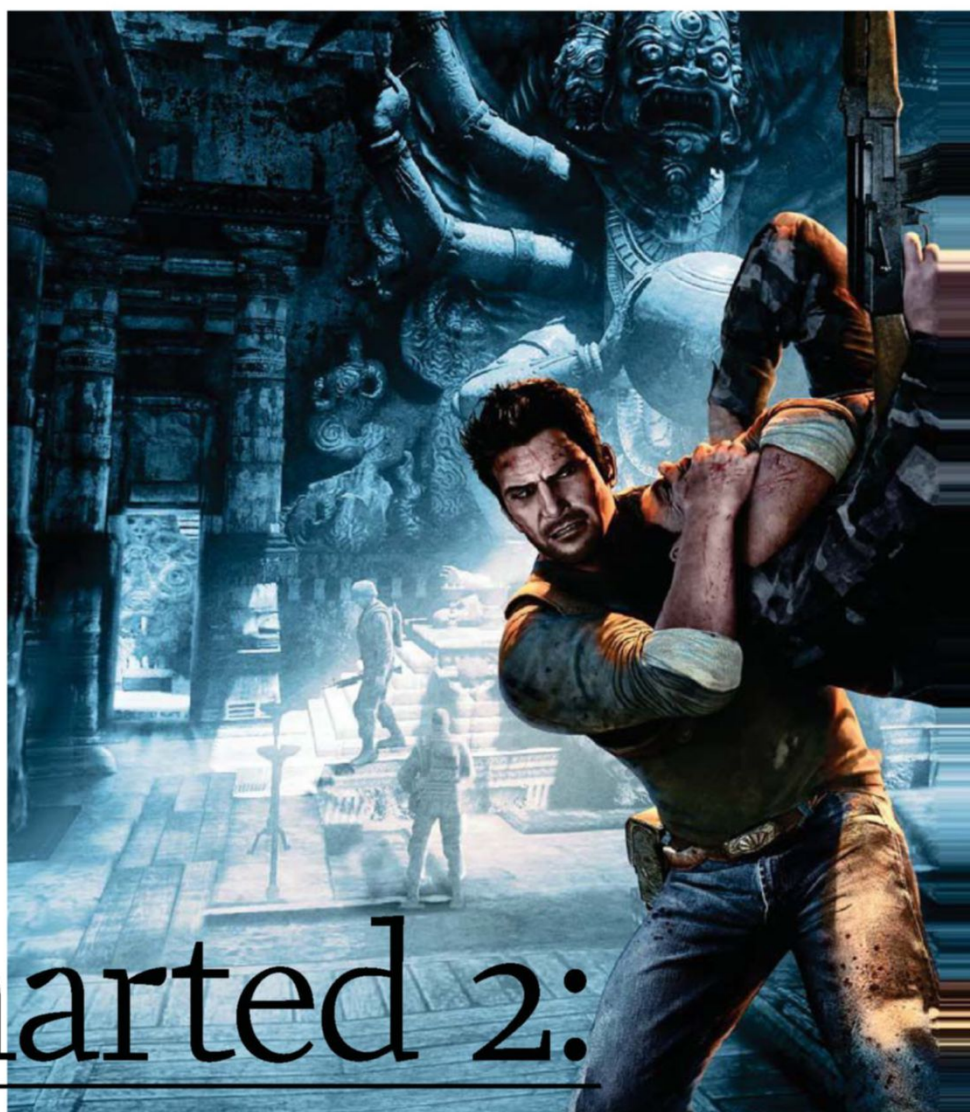
Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

Naughty Dog's technological journey to discover its humanity

By Nathan Ditum

Publisher SCE **Developer** Naughty Dog **Format** PS3 **Release** 2009

The outgoing console generation's legacy may very well be the perfection of the tightly focused ten-hour campaign. If you define it that way, then *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* could claim to be the game of that generation; not the *best* game, but the one that is emblematic of tightly bound adventures built on the thrills of big worlds and bombastic set-pieces. Naughty Dog's matinée revival has moments of technically astounding action; a lead character capable of carrying an almost unheard-of tonal range of tension, comedy and tragedy, where comparable blockbusters do anger as one long machine-gun burst; plus it embraces ideas of storytelling and entertainment that trigger a rare investment in its cast. It is, in other words, a beautiful game that is also very good at people.

Indeed, it's accomplished at almost everything. *Uncharted 2*'s opening displays a casual confidence of craft and an eagerness for experimentation, breaking in at the story's halfway point and reintroducing us to hero Nathan Drake with snapshot characterisation: he's battered ("That's my blood"), blithe ("That's a *lot* of my blood"), and, suddenly, he's upside down, a perspective yank turning a stationary train carriage into a vertiginous shaft. Drake plunges past seats and into the first of many hyperbolic translations of cinematic devices — here the teetering mountainside vehicle, but later a moving train, the unpinned grenade, and last-gasp fingertip handholds.

There's something overtly cinematic in that opening: the formalist interruption, a trick instinctively taken from the splice-and-join of film editing; the precariousness of the train, a literal cliffhanger. And it's generally agreed there's something overtly cinematic in *Uncharted 2* itself. The game is sandy adventure and sunset romance as seen down the sights of a pistol or on flickering screens since long before Indiana Jones, harking back to the time of Gunga Din. It is also the problematic culmination of Hollywood's decades-long flirtation with games in the obsessive search for synergy.

All of which is to say that *Uncharted 2* not only bears highly visible influences from the movies, the basic colour of its world taken from the themes and tokens of big-screen romantic adventure, but that Naughty Dog's reverence for story might have produced the closest thing to convergence between film and games that doesn't involve a cabinet spinning a LaserDisc to create a cartoon dragon. The studio has embraced the craft of storytelling as taught by the film industry, and emerged with a new production process that devotes a sustained, expensive amount of time (the irony of that synergistic urge — there is no shortcut to convergence) to performance capture, to workshopping and rehearsal with actors on a digital soundstage.

The result is not a revolution. *Uncharted 2* does not solve the inelegance of the cutscene, and still needs to interrupt itself in order to tell a story. And it does not broaden the corridors of that tightly focused ten-hour experience — the game is relentlessly linear, a gilded cage of invisible walls and beautifully textured boundaries. This is where *Uncharted 2*'s cinematic-ness slides from cool observation to criticism. Is it even a game, really? It's so on-rails.

Let's talk about trains, since we seem to be back on one. Walter Murch, editor of Apocalypse Now, once drew a link between the railway and film, between clickety-clack technologies that run along tracks and their shared sense of perception and mechanical possibility. It is, he said, to do with a way of seeing the world. "There is the idea of the voyage. Every voyage is a story."

This idea runs through *Uncharted 2*. The train wrecked and suspended in that opening is reanimated to become the major action beat of the game's second act, where it carries Drake on a journey to catch up with his own story. Consciously or not — and it's hard to think it could have been totally unintentional — *Uncharted 2* has internalised one of the great symbols of cinema, one of the first objects to be filmed in Lumière's L'arrivée D'un Train En Gare De La Ciotat, scattering apocryphal audiences terrified of the onrushing engine, and the heaving iron horse central to the Western. But the train is also a symbol of this generation's great form, the focused, ten-hour singleplayer campaign — these rails might leave little room for deviation, ▶

but they offer a hell of a ride. This is still a game, just a different form of play, one closer to the cinema, built on spectatorship and sympathy, an act of mimesis.

When it's not being a symbol of ambition and convergence, Drake's train journey is the most astonishing few minutes of play on PS3. The train rattles through a jungle so apparently endless it ceases to be anything other than real, while Drake leaps, slugs and hip-fires his way from carriage to carriage, everything feeling detached and independent, dynamic and precarious. This is something *Uncharted 2* does with confounding regularity: delivers moments that are impossible to play without clocking a jolt of conspicuous technical achievement. It's there in the opening, as the camera rushes outward to reveal a cavernous drop and Himalayan

derailment and brings the injured stranger to his village in the Himalayas (and then, admittedly, helps him blow up that tank). His wordless friendship with Drake is forged in a single level (and not even one of the game's best), traversing ice caverns and encountering yetis, a sense of trust built through cooperation. The relationship is inspired by *Ico*, PS2's fairytale of companions and castles, and went on to

The train is woven through *Uncharted 2*'s snaking timeline, providing both a crash-bang opening and a superlative action climax

WHAT MAKES UNCHARTED 2 REMARKABLE ARE ITS PEOPLE, WHO ARE AS BRIGHT AS ANY OF THE THINGS THAT BLOW UP

scale. It's there as Drake is hounded by a helicopter over the baking rooftops of Kathmandu, racing through capsizing buildings and into impossible landings. And it's there as a tank attacks a mountain-top village, punching through stone-stacked houses and chasing Drake along walls and up stairways with spitting rakes of machine-gun fire. *Uncharted 2* emerges from Naughty Dog's conception of itself as a company. It's a company that tells stories, but also one driven by technology and a belief that technological achievement, spectacle, can be beautiful in its own right.

Ultimately, though, what makes *Uncharted 2* truly remarkable are its people, who are as bright and memorable as any of the things that crash or blow up inside it. Take Tenzin the Tibetan Sherpa, who finds Drake in the snow following his train

inform *The Last Of Us*. It's an act of emotional play, of attachment and sympathy — and this sympathy, the game discovers, provides a more urgent motivation for gameplay than any regular power fantasy or destructive urge. When the tank arrives, it threatens Tenzin's daughter, and destroying it becomes an act of loyalty — it's not meaningless fury, but directed, nuanced outrage. This is cinematic play.

As well as mystical mountain men, *Uncharted 2* also delivers on overlooked basics. The women in Drake's life are unusually formidable. Chloe, played by Claudia Black, is marked by an uncommon depth of motivation. She's not defined by her feelings towards Drake, but ambiguously attracted to him, another man and, crucially, her own best interests. She's believable, unpredictable, and dangerous. On the other

TOP **A trek through icy blue caves is where Drake's warm friendship with Tenzin grows.** ABOVE **There's a travelogue mix of settings, from white mountains to green jungles**

Desperate escapes from collapsing buildings and overturning vehicles reveal the team's technical mastery, and deliver regular jolts of seismic, disorienting panic

STRAIGHT SHOOTER

The meat of *Uncharted 2*'s gameplay comes in the form of combat. Away from the much-discussed cutscenes and linear acrobatics, its gunplay offers the most options for interaction and player choice. While there's an irony that, as far as a player is concerned, Nathan Drake's only means of expression is through violence, what's noteworthy is the character of that violence. The combat has a swagger and roll that suits the rangy, improvisational Drake. Aiming eschews dead-eyed precision and Drake's reticule seems to swing wide and free over his shoulder, making for frantic Hollywood firefights of dashes between cover and scattered gunfire punctuated by devastating explosions and showstopping punches. It's imprecise but charming, and while it isn't perfect, it might be the ideal fit for this kind of story.

hand, series mainstay Elena, played by Emily Rose, is a blonde love interest in a game about guns and endless action. But she's also sceptical and strong, and so when the series does finally bring her and Drake together romantically at the close of this game — the first didn't consider it essential — it feels earned and touching. Their relationship is a two-way street of humour and humanity, and is a greater payoff than any climactic boss battle.

At the very epicentre of *Uncharted 2*'s achievement is Nathan Drake himself. He is not only likeable, but well liked. This is no easy thing to achieve in videogames, and it makes so many others possible. Bland heroes proliferate because of the dangerous logic that we'd rather play as polite aggregations of nothing in particular than as people who are definitely not us. Drake

overflows with personality — a function of smart writing, but also, it's hard not to think, of a performance process that gives the game's actors, and Nolan North in particular, a chance to pour more of themselves into each character.

When Tenzin brings Drake back to his village, and after his recuperation, Drake wakes up and wanders through the houses, mountains on every side. As he meets Tenzin's people, the button for a melee attack becomes the button to shake hands, or to salute, or to play football with children. Just for a few moments, a square-jawed hero is capable of interacting with his surroundings by reaching out and making connections rather than swinging fists and breaking faces. And just for a moment, Nathan Drake gets to simply exist. It's so quiet in the village. He can stand and breathe. He can smile and be human.

This is to call attention to *Uncharted 2*'s storytelling and all-round craft, rather than a suggestion that humanitarian positivism is the bedrock of acing the thirdperson shooter. And it's certainly not an attempt to reconcile the contradiction of this being the standout moment of a game about killing hundreds of soldiers — it can't be done, and *Uncharted 2* doesn't have all of the answers. But it does have the imagination to offer us the possibility that things could be different, and it remains remarkable as a game driven by technology that succeeds on the grounds of its humanity. ■

JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

October saw the UK inflation rate rise to 1.3 per cent. Yes, I'm aware that this is the worst sentence in history with which to start a page about videogames. In fact, it's the worst sentence in history to start anything you'd like people to read. But one of the big factors cited as causing this is the pre-Christmas sales figures of games.

We're told time and time again what an important industry we work in, and yet we're still surprised when there's evidence for this. And for a minute, we all stop thinking about what we should be doing and wonder about the sheer difference we're making to people's lives. Not in a meaningful way, but simply because we're all playing something now. And if we're not, we know everyone else is.

Big games are events now. When something massive gets launched, it makes the news. It goes to show that this stuff is serious and needs to be taken seriously. Sometimes, though, I get the feeling that it isn't. People in hoodies queue for days to buy an eagerly anticipated game, and we know that when they get it home, they'll coo over the art, the physics and spine-tingling, reactionary music. But a year ago, when it was being created, we were deciding how many FedEx-style delivery missions we could get away with; whether the dependable second-in-command NPC dies a third of the way in, or two-thirds; and how to weigh the exchange rates for gems and armour according to how far the player has to go to sell or buy them.

Do we stick to the same formulas with these things because people want or expect them? Or do they expect them because that's what they always get? Or do we do it simply because that's what we always do?

The movie industry. Yes, I'm going to go there. Filmmakers don't mind in the slightest when their products are described as rom-coms, or zombie movies. The public get it, and if they're fans of the genre, they know what they can expect. There just has to be a few twists and some new stuff somewhere, and everyone's happy. Games are the same,

Nobody's going to create a game so different it's like discovering a new colour or musical note

surely? Running between a car and a bank while shooting people in the face is the same as running between a parked spaceship and a teleporter while shooting people facially. Shall we play cops and robbers today, or cowboys and indigenous Americans?

Surely all the truly different stuff is, as it always has been, coming from little indies and crazy breakaway teams? You'd think. But even in those usually mobile-based markets, the same familiar things appear. You race around collecting things and avoiding bad guys. You build towers along a path to fire at streams of marching enemies. You race against time to

squeeze through tighter and tighter gaps. It's all the same underneath, so it really is style and presentation that make all the difference.

There have been defined genres ever since there has been more than one game, and within those games there have been clichés or memes or tropes. And it doesn't mean lazy thinking on behalf of the developers. It's simply a way of providing things players know and love in a new and, ideally, exciting way. Take tower defence as an example: for some reason I love these games and will play as many different variations of them as I can. Underneath, they are the very definition of 'all the same' but, hey, this one has arrow towers which set the enemies on fire. I've never seen precisely that before, and I love it. Ooh, this tower sends the foe back to the start. I have seen that before, but this time the robots/trolls/members of U2 lose hit points as it happens. I love it too! It's just so novel!

So what have we learned? Perhaps we live in an age where no one's doing vastly different and innovative stuff. Perhaps the industry is settling down and simply producing better, neater versions of things we all know and love. It might be a hardware thing – with greater processing power comes greater creativity. No, that's not the case. We could make anything we wanted to right now. If we did, we'd do it better and more slickly in a few years, but unlike the movie revolutions – colour, sound, CGI and so on – nothing, not even VR, will change the fundamental nature of the games we're making. Things will just get bigger, more real and more immersive. Of course, people will experiment, but nobody's going to create a game so different it's like discovering a new colour or musical note. That's my cheerful prediction for the future and my regular reader knows I'm never wrong.

Right, I'm off to spend a few happy hours playing a wide variety of dissimilar games in which I have to collect gems to trade for slightly more protective armour.

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