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DESTINY 2
BEYOND LIGHT

HOW BUNGIE IS TRANSFORMING THE FPS FOR A NEW GENERATION

NEXT GEN KICKS OFF

PLAYSTATION 5, XBOX SERIES X, AND THE CHEQUE THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

#351
DECEMBER 2020

REVIEWED

MARVEL'S AVENGERS
CRUSADER KINGS III
PENDRAGON
I AM DEAD
PARADISE KILLER
MOON
TELL ME WHY

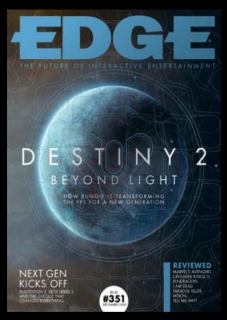
You're as cold as ice, you're willing to sacrifice

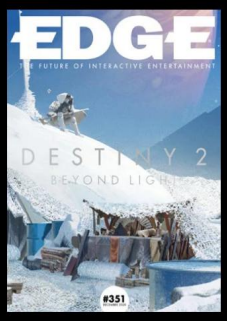
Success rarely comes for free. We're not necessarily talking about money – although, as we send this issue of **Edge** off to print, Microsoft's $7.5 billion acquisition of ZeniMax Media, and therefore Bethesda, is the talk of the industry. The Xbox maker now owns an entire publisher. With this huge outlay, presumably, comes a number of what Xbox spent all of last generation failing to secure: exclusives.

Yes, it's concerning that in this capitalist nightmare we all live in, the size of someone's chequebook might be able to decide a console generation. But it's not just the money. It's the *manners*. Xbox has spent the last seven years humbled, building an ecosystem and a next-gen strategy designed to win people over by offering great value. Sony, riding high on last gen's win, is taking a very different approach, and might be in for some trouble. Either way, things just got interesting.

Meanwhile, Rami Ismail and Jan Willem Nijman are looking to the future by voluntarily dissolving their beloved studio. Vlambeer is closing its doors after ten years as one of the indie scene's leading lights, its founders confident the project has now served its purpose. In Going Dutch, you'll find their last-ever interview as Vlambeer, a fond – and hilariously honest – look back on the road they've travelled together as unlikely collaborators.

But perhaps nobody knows sacrifice better than our cover star. Calling *Destiny 2: Beyond Light* an expansion doesn't feel quite right: with this update, Bungie will cut away swathes of its multiplayer FPS, 'vaulting' them temporarily while adding new Stasis subclasses, customisable powers, quests to chase and gear to earn, as well as finding ways to bring back much-loved parts of *Destiny*'s past. It's a gamble – but with this highly unorthodox FPS only ever getting bigger, and the next generation right around the corner, its makers have to do something drastic to ensure its sustainability. If Bungie can pull this off, the future looks bright indeed, and all the stress will have been worth it. The story begins on p54.





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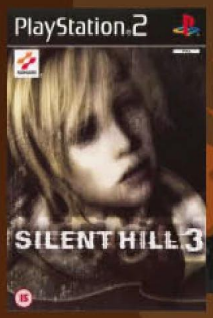

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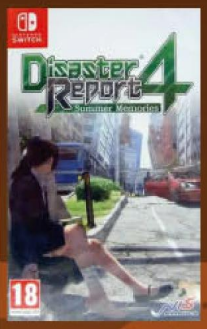

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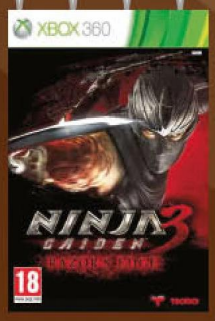

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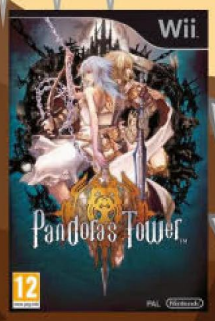

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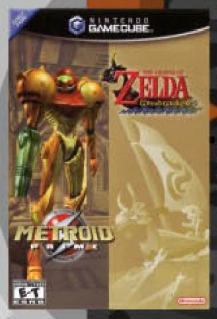

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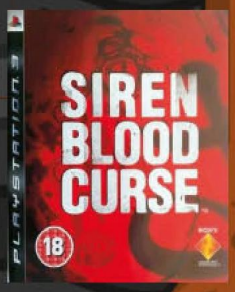

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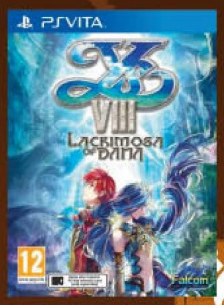

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Pay to win

As confusion reigns around new consoles, Microsoft's money makes the clearest statement of the generation so far

We'll be candid, because somebody has to be: our next-generation transition has not exactly been going swimmingly. In all fairness, we imagine much of the rest of the industry, from the CEOs to the developers to the marketing teams and beyond, might say the same thing. The arrival of COVID-19 has thrown even the best-laid plans into disarray, and everyone has scrambled to readjust. But never have we experienced such a dearth of information when it comes to the new consoles from Sony and Microsoft.

Normally, we'd have had at least a few opportunities – E3, absent this year, being the big one – to speak with the top execs on both sides by now, to quiz them on the finer details of the machines and the strategies around them. We'd also likely have had the chance to go hands-on with each machine, and to make a considered assessment. On the cover of **E**256, a full five months out from launch, we were able to show you a PS4 and tell you: "This is your next console". At present, we're not sure what to say. It's indicative of the most confusing transition period ever, thanks in part due to the administrative grenade that is the global pandemic, but also the increasingly fine differences between the current generation and the next.

We'd love to be proved wrong, but opportunities to eat our words are few and far between, as both sides move cautiously: with hands-on events all but impossible, we imagine carefully presented messaging is more crucial than ever to sales, lest too many of the wrong journalists ask too many probing questions, removed from the context of playing these things for themselves. As recently as early September, we were all set to sit down with Phil Spencer, executive vice-president of Gaming at Microsoft, and his team to discuss Xbox Series X. And then, the leak: on September 7, a tech site posted photos of, and Microsoft's trailer for, Series X's long-rumoured little brother, Lockhart.

HANDS OFF
Currently, PS5's big next-gen hardware play appears to be the DualSense controller. But naturally, beyond a few artsy ad spots, it's been impossible for PlayStation to demonstrate its power and appeal as a next-gen peripheral, with COVID-19 putting paid to the hands-on events that were no doubt planned for this. The big selling point appears to be its ability to immerse you in the sensations of games like never before: adaptive triggers can recreate the feel of pulling a bowstring taut, or a gun jamming; haptic feedback works to convey the gritty resistance of spinning car tyres through mud. Which all sounds very futuristic, although so did Switch's HD Rumble feature, and it's not exactly proven a game-changer in the grand scheme of things. Add in the recent confusion around controllers – first Sony said you can't use a DualShock 4 to play PS5 games, but then confirmed the likes of *Horizon: Forbidden West* for PS4, making us wonder why we can't use the PS4 pad after all – and we remain sceptical.

Officially named Xbox Series S, the all-digital box is designed to be a more accessible alternative to Series X while still offering a significant next-gen tech upgrade. Resolution tops out at 1440p compared to Series X's potential 8K, and you get four teraflops of GPU processing power – around the same as PS4 Pro – compared to Series X's 12. But with DirectX ray-tracing capabilities, super-fast SSD storage, framerates up to 120fps and the exact same CPU as Series X, it's a hell of a proposition. Especially when you consider that the CPU, at 3.6GHz, has a higher clock speed than PS5 (which doesn't mean much in practical terms, but is a bit of a blow to the perception of PS5 as the fastest machine). All credit to Microsoft, it reacted to the leak swiftly, and elegantly. Our interviews were still on. And just hours after the leak, a tweet was posted, officially confirming the console alongside its price: £250. The internet exploded.

> This was easily the most player-friendly deal in console launch history, a sucker punch for the ages

With Xbox Game Pass now revealed to include EA Play at no extra cost, a range of pay-monthly finance options for both Series S and Series X, and a video showing Quick Resume in action, it looked like it was over for Sony. This was easily the most irresistible, player-friendly deal in console launch history, presented at a time when fewer people than ever can afford to shell out several hundred pounds for a game console. It was a sucker punch for the ages, and one that Microsoft, very much on the back foot throughout the previous generation, had been winding up for seven years. Why announce Series S this late? Because Sony was gearing up to compete with a £600 console. Sun Tzu, eat your heart out. What we would have given to be a fly on the wall when Sony execs refreshed their Twitter feeds that day.

So why was it at this moment that Microsoft got cold feet about interviews? To our mind, it was either a sign of sudden overconfidence or, perhaps more likely, that the reaction to Series S was more than it had ever dreamed – and that there were some further caveats regarding Series S that it would prefer to wait a while, perhaps until pre-orders were in, before widely discussing. Indeed, it wasn't long before questions arose regardless. Series S's 512GB of storage, in particular, has garnered concern from industry professionals, who anticipate a bottlenecking effect during next gen as a direct result of it. Axel Gneiting, principal engine programmer at id Software, tweeted to criticise "the RAM situation," saying, "This isn't easy to compensate and drags down base spec quite a bit for next-gen multiplatform." Senior technical producer at Remedy Entertainment Sasan Sepehr also gave his two cents: "As a consumer, I love this! As a technical producer, I see trouble."

And then there's Quick Resume, the most next-gen feature we've seen from either console. The demo handler in the ▶

The small, sleek Series S is key to Microsoft's next-gen strategy, an accessible option that makes Series X look even better value – simply by existing

trailer switched from playing *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* into picking up where they left off mid-battle *Minecraft Dungeons*, before then heading straight into a drop-in on *Skate 3* – with mere seconds between each swap. Building off Xbox One's suspend-and-resume tech, Microsoft has essentially achieved current-gen savestates. But with Series S sporting just 10GB of RAM, it's hard to see where the space to do this is coming from (we note the footprints of the games used to demonstrate this feature become increasingly smaller with each title). Microsoft, it seems, still isn't willing to share the size of the SSD cache used to do this. To say nothing of the speed requirements: we're talking about multiple gigabytes of data transfer per second for Quick Resume to work as advertised. If it's really possible without a serious caveat somewhere, this kind of user interface optimisation could be a real game-changer – but with still Microsoft holding its cards unusually close to its chest, it's hard to say for sure.

Indeed, if Sony has something similarly brilliant up its sleeve with PlayStation 5, it wasn't telling during its showcase, which arrived a little over a week after the official Series S price announcement. After a generation spent riding high, it was strange to see Sony so visibly on the defence. Not only was Sony Interactive Entertainment's president and CEO Jim Ryan's post-price exclamation of "So now you know" a little too conveniently vague – the post-Xbox announcement markdown on both the disc-supporting (£449) and fully digital (£359) versions of PS5, we've heard, was eye-watering stuff – but the announcement of the PS Plus Collection was a clear attempt to present at least something in response to the value proposition of Game Pass, adding a selection of PS4's most celebrated titles to PS Plus subscribers' software libraries at no extra cost. Although few who bought a PS4 will find much benefit from it, it's a decent gesture of goodwill to newcomers.

With the admittedly seismic exception of the trailer for *Final Fantasy XVI*, it was also the only real surprise of the show. Harry Potter RPG *Hogwarts Legacy* was finally officially unveiled, and the announcement that a *God Of War* sequel was in the works was, as a good friend of the show remarked, "like announcing there'll be a Monday next week". There were exclusives, but all known quantities, Bluepoint's stunning *Demon's Souls* remake among them. And while bonfire fast-travel in that game is now loading screen-free thanks to the capabilities of PS5's SSD, elsewhere it was tough to see any real next-gen selling points of Sony's new console – nothing on the level of Quick Resume. Are *Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart* portals really all it's got? We wonder whether there's anything being held back for an 11th-hour reveal.

Bluepoint is on top form with the *Demon's Souls* PS5 remake. FromSoft's games don't typically pull in huge sales, although it'll be appreciated by enthusiasts – despite a sacrilegious change of the 'You Died' font

Especially because it seems as if Sony is determined to be as evasive – sneaky, some might say – as possible with its approach to next-gen. 'Twas ever thus: almost immediately after its showcase, the caveats began to surface on Twitter – mainly via Geoff Keighley's account, which seemed strange. After months of Ryan insisting that Sony "believes in generations," PS5 games *Horizon Forbidden West* and *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* will also be available on PS4, it transpired. (PlayStation also announced that the price of a next-gen game would increase: one game will set you back around £70, including launch-day titles *Demon's Souls*, *Destruction AllStars* and *Sackboy: A Big Adventure*.) And then there was the messy pre-order situation. Technically, we suppose, marketing head Eric Lempel wasn't telling fibs when he promised PS5 preorders wouldn't be announced with "a minute's notice". Sony gave no notice at all, as retailers began to put up stock on their sites as soon as the showcase ended.

> With trust in the PlayStation brand high after last gen's decisive win, people flocked to secure consoles

While it's likely it wasn't a completely calculated move, it certainly didn't hurt sales. With trust in the PlayStation brand high after last gen's decisive win, and firstparty exclusives on the table, legions of people flocked to secure their consoles – with many failing to beat the queues, and others missing the memo completely. Many, however, managed to place their bets on PS5, as potential Xbox buyers trailed in the Twitter polls. At this point, Sony will have to do a lot worse to tarnish the reputation for quality – both in hardware and software – it has built up over the years. Or, indeed, Microsoft could strike with something huge.

And strike it has, that something huge being a chequebook. Brilliantly, the news

How the tables turn. Xbox One's bulky VHS player prompted many a joke next to PS4's angular lines – now Series X looks the more stylish (and practical) choice

arrived before Series X and S pre-orders opened: Xbox has acquired Zenimax Media, and therefore Bethesda Softworks, for $7.5 billion. It is, of course, the biggest news of the year, and possibly of the generation. Every future Bethesda game – whether it be the new *Elder Scrolls*, *Fallout*, *Doom*, *Dishonored*, *Wolfenstein* – will launch day one on Game Pass for all subscribers. Presumably, exclusively – although when it's a choice between £70 and 'free', perhaps it makes no difference whether they are or not. (Microsoft, charitably, will honour Bethesda's PS5 exclusivity deals for *Deathloop* and *Ghostwire Tokyo*, but there's surely no way Sony saw this coming when it proudly paraded *Deathloop* at its showcase.) On one level, it's terrifying that Microsoft has the funds to just outright buy a chunk of the game industry as we know it. On the other, it's hard not to enjoy the drama of it all. We can't imagine a world in which this is profitable for Microsoft, but it is one hell of a statement.

Whether it will tip the balance in favour of Xbox, and the broader ecosystem of Game Pass, remains to be seen – as do so many of the details of this generation of consoles. But if Sony and Microsoft really are struggling to find a no-brainer argument for us to upgrade, it may well be all about the exclusives – and Xbox has just flipped the script on PlayStation entirely. ■

Xbox may have just secured a future of exclusives – for over three times the cost of Minecraft, and nearly twice Disney, you'd hope so – but the fact remains that PS5 owners will have new exclusives to play at launch, whereas Xbox is lacking. The investment is clearly in Game Pass: if it pays off, the latter half of the generation could well belong to Xbox

TRUMP CARDS

Nvidia's got some next-gen parts to show off too

Amongst all the console confusion, Nvidia sowed a further seed of chaos by announcing its new RTX 30-series GPUs. Incredibly, even the lowest-spec card outperforms RTX 2080 Ti, the fastest graphics card of the previous generation. That card, the RTX 3070, is slated for launch in October, and will cost just £469; the higher-spec, higher-priced 3080 and 3090 have already launched, with the former bought up by bots in mere seconds, to Nvidia's embarrassment. In a generation where cross-platform play reigns supreme, it makes more sense than ever to buy a PC instead of a console. With such powerful GPUs now at console prices, many will be tempted to finally take the leap.

Strike up the brand

New label MWM Interactive takes a modern approach to the indie publishing scene

Earlier this year, Tinybuild CEO Alex Nichiporchik made an assertion: "Indie publishing is dead." Currently, the *Hello Neighbor* franchise co-founder pointed out, the videogame market is saturated with mid-size publishers. Those who do find success manage to trade in not just games, but their very identities – think the punk posturing of Devolver Digital, or the arthouse stylings of Annapurna Interactive. "Instead of focusing on one-off publishing deals," Nichiporchik suggested, "it's better to build strong and entertaining brands."

Enter MWM Interactive, a new arm of entertainment company Madison Wells Media, that's looking to make a name for itself by doing just that. MWM's film division is notable for producing pictures such as Nicholas Winding Refn's neon-spiked noir Drive, as well as 21 Bridges, which stars the late Chadwick Boseman. Not so long ago, it began exploring the possibilities of virtual reality for interactive entertainment, which is how MWMi's executive VP of content **Ethan Stearns** – who had experience with this in his previous role at Legendary Pictures – came to join the company. "They'd started doing some projects based on Sony Pictures IP – they were producing them and financing them, but they didn't really know what else to do," Stearns tells us. "Like, they weren't sure what their role was in it. So I came in at first mostly as a producer, but then looking forward down the road. 'Okay, well, what are we building? Why are we doing this long term – other than these projects, which are super cool, what are we? What are we trying to be?' The company, philosophically, is interested in storytelling, but I think *more* than just storytelling – finding unique voices, and bringing artistically unique content into the mainstream entertainment world."

He figured if he was going to build anything at MWM, it should be a publisher – and move beyond the VR space. "They were surprised that I made the argument that VR is games: how they're distributed, the hardware that they're using, the consumers who buy the VR content are gamers. So my pitch internally was: 'Let's expand out of VR, because having a publisher solely focused on VR at this time doesn't make sense.'"

Devolver, Double Fine, Raw Fury and of course fellow film studio offshoot Annapurna Interactive were all touchstones when Stearns looked to shape MWMi, and define its identity as a publisher in an era where such a thing is often crucial to success. "In a time where it's very hard to find games in a congested marketplace," he says, "the hope is that we can foster a community around the games that we're making, and around the brand ideals that we have, that help move audiences from game to game.

> "When you're doing artistically obtuse games, I think it can be hard to earn the trust of the gamer"

"When you're doing more artistically obtuse games, I think it can be hard to earn the trust of the gamer," he continues. "And so I think having a brand coming from a place of quality is super important in earning that trust." MWMi's forthcoming lineup is promising in that regard: both games pictures on the opposite page, *Maskmaker*, a VR story from the creators of *A Fisherman's Tale*, and *Mundaun*, a hand-drawn 3D horror adventure, are unusual concepts executed with expertise. The future-looking signings are significant, too: *Oxenfree* developer Night School Studio will release its next game under the MWMi label, as will the amusingly similarly-named Flight School Studio, which previously worked with MWMi on *Creature In The Well*.

Executive VP of content Ethan Stearns

What the lineup doesn't do just yet is paint an especially distinct picture of what MWMi's viewpoint as a publisher is. Stearns tells us he believes the way to build a new publisher's identity is to allow the games it's making to inform its growth, in a "chicken or the egg"-esque scenario. "We're reaching out to find the games that are, to us, furthering the evolution of storytelling in games." He pauses. "We're so young, so it's hard for me to say, 'this is who we are.' Because it feels like I'm puffing up my chest and saying something that I haven't proven yet. But looking at those comparable groups out there – I think Annapurna is a super-refined, very high-art company with the stuff that they make. I think that we are a little bit more approachable – I hope."

Accessibility informs MWMi's scouting process (a holdover, it seems, from their VR history, a platform that people less familiar with games find fairly natural to use). "That means different things to different people. But what it means to me is, like, Gigi [Pritzker], who's our CEO, she doesn't play games," Stearns says. "If you hand a game controller to somebody, they're like, 'I don't know what to do with this' – mouse and keyboard is even worse. And that sucks. People can go sit in a movie theatre and like, *receive* a movie, but Gigi can't just jump in and play a game. There's something interesting about games that can be conceptually deep, but on the surface are very approachable. So that's another thing that we're looking at – trying to find games that can bring in new audiences." ■

Stearns has worked for Legendary Pictures, New Line Cinema and Dreamworks. "For me, those brands always represented something. But people in the industry always say, 'Brands don't matter. Disney's the only brand that matters. No other publishing brand matters. Activision doesn't matter, EA doesn't matter.' I really don't believe that, and I don't *want* to believe that. So it is something we're pushing towards. All being said, to us, it's not about like telling our story – it's about helping tell the stories of developers that we're identifying"

In-flight simulator

A Desert Bus for the streaming era? AMC's Airplane Mode prepares for take-off

When we call up **Hosni Auji**, he's just putting the finishing touches to a game that simulates a six-hour economy-class flight in real time. So we're caught off guard when we ask how his debut got started, and he reveals he is – or was – an anxious flyer. "Generally, a week before I had to fly, I'd always read anything I could find online to calm myself down and reassure myself that flying is fine." In that process, and from talking to people about their airborne experiences, he ended up with what he initially thought was "a useless bag of factoids," albeit one that prompted a keen interest in civil aviation.

As such, when Auji was tasked with developing a thesis project for a Masters programme at the NYU Game Center, one setting immediately sprang to mind. Initially, he conceived a turn-based card game that just happened to take place on a commercial airliner. But over time he realised the only element that inspired him was the environment. There were already plenty of games set on aeroplanes where you're cast as the pilot, he reckoned; why not try to recreate what the experience of flight is like for most of us? "It's like, man has always wanted to fly, right? The dream of flying is about freedom and exhilaration. But where we're at now it's a bit surreal. We just kind of sit, sip wine, watch movies on the back of the seat, and pretend that we're not in the plane, that we're somewhere else. That's what flying is today. And I thought that would be interesting to make a project about."

Noting that, ironically, such an idea "wouldn't fly commercially," Auji found the academic context of *Airplane Mode*'s early development freeing. When he started discussing it with faculty members, one compared it to Penn & Teller's *Desert Bus*, and the rest of the pieces started falling into place. As much as anything else, he says, it's made his game easier to talk about, because it gives people a frame of reference. Like *Desert Bus*, there's no mid-game save: you'll have to play through it in one sitting. But it has also helped him define the differences. "Flight protocol is generally the same across the board, but that doesn't mean everyone's going to have the same experience. I thought if we can just build a prototype of commercial airline flight, and fill it with as many of the different idiosyncrasies – or annoyances, even – [as we can] then let's see how people react."

> "We just kind of sit, sip wine, watch movies on the back of the seat, and pretend that we're not in the plane"

There are plenty of activities with which you can fill the five hours and 45 minutes between New York and Reykjavik. In your seat pocket, you'll find a magazine with articles you can read, and crosswords and Sudoku puzzles to complete with a pen from your carry-on bag. You can watch or listen to the in-flight entertainment, too, including black-and-white films from the 1930s that are now in the public domain, or simply track your flight path while you tuck into a meal (which, in truth, looks rather tastier than its real-life equivalent often does).

Such a range of options – and the authenticity of their presentation – would not have been possible but for the help of AMC Games, a new offshoot of the popular cable network. Its director of games Simon Ferrari first came into contact with *Airplane Mode* in his role as NYU professor. While helping run the university's games incubator, he got in touch with colleague **Clayton Neuman**, having identified Auji's game as a candidate for its first release as a publisher. "We created AMC Games to help give unique voices a platform," Neuman tells us. "And we wanted our first game to be unique, too. Usually, when you think of a comedy game it's like an adventure game with funny dialogue or a physics-based slapstick sandbox. But *Airplane Mode* stood out as something different. It's totally deadpan. It's 90 per cent earnest and serious simulation and 10 per cent tongue in cheek, winking at the player. And we love that combination." Neuman and Ferrari subsequently invited IFC, the network's offbeat comedy channel, to create material for the game – ranging from the in-flight safety video to its promotional trailers.

It's almost certain to be a cult favourite among streamers, we suggest – even if many will resort to the alternative option, a flight of less than half the length to Halifax in Nova Scotia. And Auji credits Ferrari and Neuman for helping him realise that. "I was not very aware of streamer culture, but AMC helped me to really focus on thinking about things that would be fun for streamers to enjoy with their subscribers while they're playing." Without straying from the mundane milieu, there will be surprises in store for anyone with the stamina to sit through the six-hour journey in its entirety. "Without giving away too much, there are random events with different degrees of severity," Auji says, before adding enigmatically, "Some things happen more frequently than others based on real-world statistics. Let's just leave it at that." ■

FINAL DESTINATION
Since he's based in New York, it's obvious why Auji chose JFK as the starting point. But what made Reykjavik the ideal terminus? "I knew I wanted two things," Auji begins. "I wanted it to be around six hours, and I wanted it to be transatlantic, because the transatlantic flight is core to the civil aviation experience. It seemed like the best choice because it's also on my bucket list of places to visit. So I figured I might as well visit it virtually." The Halifax alternative, he says, is simply for people who can't fit a free six-hour slot into their schedule. But could you potentially take off, leave the game running and do something else? "Absolutely. Whatever you've got to do to get through to landing is fine with me."

***Airplane Mode* creator Hosni Auji studied at the NYU Game Center**

While *Flight Simulator* uses live real-world satellite data for added verisimilitude, *Airplane Mode* promises only "fairly accurate" imagery of your flight path. "There's a general vibe that's almost standardised across airlines," Auji says. "Some will do some things a bit better, but I wanted this to be a middle-of-the-road airline – one that's somehow relatable to everyone, but that doesn't really exist"

After a day of dungeon-crawling, you can choose between getting to know locals in the village bar, or nipping to the shop before getting ready back at the hotel for your next run

APRÈS SLAY

Microbird's crisp blend of action-RPG and life simulator delivers an alpine aesthetic that's a real breath of fresh air

A booming tourism industry has sprung up around the 25 eponymous – and deeply magical – dungeons of Hinterberg, with adventurers from around the world drawn to the Austrian hills to fight their way through the challenge. *Dungeons Of Hinterberg*'s distinctive style, the work of Regina Resinger, is inspired by graphic novels and the art of Jon Juarez and Pierre-Abraham Rochat, while the visual effects take cues from animated movies like Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse. Microbird's rendering pipeline converts normals into coloured lines, resulting in a style reminiscent of hand-drawn detail. "All our effects are aware of other objects on the screen and their materials, as well as how much light hits them," programmer and designer **Philipp Seifried** says. "So we can apply halftone effects for specific materials and only in shadows, or have smoke that turns objects behind it into a flat silhouette."

Cable cars offer scenic opportunities to chat with fellow plunderers, in between battling stylised creatures of alpine myth with adventure sports technology. Microbird is setting out to twist existing techniques so that "players really get the feeling of living through a graphic novel." Pack your sharpest sword for 2022, then, when *Dungeons Of Hinterberg* arrives on PC and consoles. ■

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SUBJECT:
OVECHKIN,
ALEX

PROFESSION:
HOCKEY PLAYER

SKILLS:
HOCKEY

NOTES:
ALL-STAR TEAM--
2007, 2008, 2009,
2011, 2012, 2015-2020;
STANLEY CUP CHAMPION--
2018;
HART MEMORIAL TROPHY--
2008, 2009, 2013;
CONN SMYTHE TROPHY--
2018...
<MORE>

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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"The big game showcases which have **only been viewable this year virtually** have meant I look forward to them like I do live-event, appointment-to-view TV."

UKIE CEO **Jo Twist** is a fan of the stay-at-home approach to videogame conferences. Indeed, we've almost forgotten the smell of the Gamescom show floor

"We're supposed to paint this picture of nirvana; however, **I just don't think it's nirvana.** Nirvana is making great hits, and people will find them."

Take-Two CEO **Strauss Zelnick** is cool on cloud gaming. And also mentally living in Seattle circa 1991

"After more than 30 years, I've decided to **stop working on videogames** and fully focus on my second passion: wildlife!"

Beyond Good & Evil director **Michel Ancel**'s got the right idea. One day this'll be us – although you can replace "wildlife" with "drinking"

"Real change will take time. But I am determined to do everything in my power to ensure everyone at Ubisoft feels welcome, respected, and safe."

Ubisoft boss **Yves Guillemot** finally addresses the company's recent abuse scandal, promising that it will take "significant steps" towards improving the treatment of its workers. Step one, presumably: hiring no more women, ever

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

Cabinet Astro City Mini
Manufacturer Sega

Alright, so it's not exactly coin-op: you'd be hard-pressed to cram a quarter into this dinky thing. Nevertheless, the spirit of the arcade is very much present in Sega's Astro City Mini. It's based on the 1993 multipurpose arcade cabinet: a successor to the Aero City, the Astro allowed operators to install a game board of their choice. With that flexibility and range in mind, the Mini comes with a large variety of Sega titles packed in. And we do mean variety: you've got *Space Harrier*, *Altered Beast* and *Puyo Puyo*, sure, but then there are also some very niche inclusions, seemingly at the expense of the real classics. *Ninja Princess* over *Out Run*? *Rad Mobile* over *After Burner*? Sega, we just want to talk.

Regardless, the hardware itself looks solid. There's an HDMI-out on the rear, two USB-A ports, a micro USB and a headphone jack. To our delight, in addition to an eight-way digital joystick (which, unlike SNK's recent Neo Geo Mini cab, uses proper microswitches), the joystick in the Mini boasts a full six-button setup, plus Start and Select – perfect for a decent, if cramped, game of *Virtua Fighter*. Die-hard players, however, can grab a full-sized arcade stick peripheral – while collectors might want to treat themselves to a tiny model stool, or a base that adds a non-functional coin slot and collection door. At a time when many won't feel comfortable returning to the arcades, it's a lovely way to recapture a little of the magic. A crying shame, then, that it'll only be available in Japan this December, with pre-orders already underway. Prepare for eBay madness.

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MOD

Rivals Of Aether Joy-Con mod
bit.ly/joyconmod

Dan Fornace's multiplayer fighting game is basically an indie *Smash Bros.*, but its debt to Nintendo hasn't stopped one Steam Workshop user from expressing frustration with Kyoto's finest. Chilean modder srPerez has already created playable tributes to Bowser and Jigglypuff, but his latest effort is a rather cheekier homage. Joy-Con – based on the detachable Switch controllers, of course – is a surprisingly decent choice of fighter. There is, however, one minor, but crucial, caveat to the portable pairing: if idle, they'll slowly drift to the left. Full marks to srPerez for authenticity, but in a month when drift claimed our final left Joy-Con, it's a reminder that Nintendo is yet to properly address an increasingly pervasive issue among Switch owners.

VIDEO

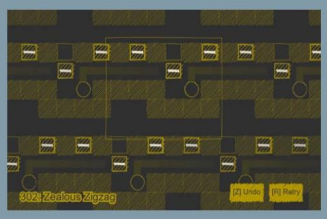
Edmund McMillen Breaks Down His Game Design History
bit.ly/ednoclip

Noclip's retrospective on *The Binding Of Isaac* creator is a fascinatingly candid chat, as he reflects on the highlights of his back catalogue with refreshing frankness. From his provocative comic-book beginnings through to the whirlwind success of *Super Meat Boy* and 2019 deck-builder *The Legend Of Bum-Bo*, McMillen digs beyond the scatological surface of his work to the deeply personal stories beneath. Affecting in places, its subject's sense of humour makes for an entertaining watch – less so for some former colleagues.

WEB GAME

Edge Not Found
bit.ly/edgenotfound

For a variety of reasons, that title hits uncomfortably close to home – though it was the endorsement of *Manifold Garden* designer William Chyr that drew us to Tom Hermans' mind-bending minimalist puzzler. Initially built for a game jam that restricted participants to a tiny 13KB file limit, *Edge Not Found* presents a series of austere *Sokoban* puzzles on grids that repeat infinitely. You'll rely on your many repeating forms to manoeuvre around these claustrophobic corridors – giving you the chance to approach from the other side when a block is obstructing your path – while later stages introduce switches that shift the environment. We've encountered more than our fair share of awkward hurdles this month, but the wave of satisfaction that follows that final push is undeniable.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

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

GLASSES

Oakley Prizm Gaming Lenses
bit.ly/gaminglenses

The jury's still out on the scientific benefits of blue light filtering lenses, but one obvious drawback of them has always been that they make you look a right berk. Sunglasses maker Oakley's Prizm Gaming range is the first we've seen that look anywhere near presentable. Apparently, they're designed to help esports athletes perform at their best, upping visual contrast and reducing 40% of blue light between the 380-500 nanometre range – no, us neither – to protect against eye strain. The glasses even feature thinner temples for increased compatibility with headsets. You've got to enquire in-store about prices though – a worrying sign – and ladies need not apply, it seems, from what we can tell from the lack of a Prizm Gaming option in the women's section. Charming.

continue

Cheap cheap cheap
Oculus announces the sleeker, more powerful Oculus Quest 2 at £299…

Imposter syndrome
Indie blame-game *Among Us* enjoys a popularity uptick two years after release

Treat
Humble's 'You Can Pet The Dog' charity bundle is a sweet nod to a celebrated Twitter account

Spawn of Satan
A modded pregnancy test? Now we truly have seen *Doom* run on everything

quit

Oh hi, Mark
…but the forced Facebook account integration is a real turn-off

Break it up
V1 Interactive sunsets *Disintegration*'s dead-on-arrival multiplayer servers

Trick
Gods & Monsters becomes *Immortals Fenyx Rising*, a name that sounds as bad as Monster Energy tastes

One more angel
Nintendo discontinues the mighty 3DS. *Electroplankton* Switch port when?

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DISPATCHES DECEMBER

Issue 350

Dialogue

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

Homeward bound

I have been playing *Mortal Kombat 11*, and enjoying the story mode as it takes me through a time-hopping journey. The problem is I am playing it on my Switch, as opposed to the PC underneath my TV.

Having recently become a parent, I have found that I've had to lower my expectations of what I can play, and for how long. I am considering replaying *BioShock Infinite*, but it won't be on my PC, as I can only get gaming time on the small screen that I look at on my commute. The re-release of *Mario Galaxy* has had me ecstatic, but I know it will only be played on a bus, with headphones plugged in.

One of the best unique selling points of the Switch was taking the same game that one would play on a TV on the go; however, I am starting to worry that due to a number of restrictions, all of which are timely, valid and normal, my gaming 'experience' will be somewhat diminished. I'm worried for the next Nintendo triple-A experience, and how my own playthrough may seem not as "full" as those who play games on a big TV.

Am I too paranoid? Or am I going to miss out on the best of the company?

Martin Hollis

> "I know *Mario Galaxy* will only be played on a bus, with headphones plugged in"

We have the opposite problem: stuck at home, we barely use handheld mode these days, and miss the flexibility it offers. It now makes more sense to play on the higher-resolution home consoles. If you're still on the move, perhaps you might even have the fuller Switch experience.

Keep the customer satisfied

In your last issue, my fellow readers lamented their lack of enthusiasm for either the new Xbox or PlayStation. Dan Chambers rightly asked if a new console focusing on bold ideas and games he hasn't seen before is "a dream too far". May I propose that the most exciting new console is the Playdate?

This console was lovingly profiled in **Edge** 333. It has a mechanical crank which invites innovation, some of the most interesting game developers creating titles for it, and is produced by a company with a great pedigree – Panic (the publisher of *Untitled Goose Game* and *Firewatch*).

If, like me, your eyes glaze over as folks blather on about frames per second and native 4K, then we need to support people who are choosing a different path. So maybe hold fire on either of the two market big guns and save your money for this little yellow box of magic instead.

Joe Crook

Excellent shout. We really ought to catch up with that lot for an update on Playdate – watch this space.

Bookends

With reference to regular correspondent Robert August De Meijer's thoughts on spoilers, it's a fine line I have cause to consider with the slightly more immediate publication of reviews for a small yet well regarded review site.

With the immediacy of the online review and its subsequent exposure on Metacritic, I find myself having to be frustratingly oblique in some reviews, especially the story-driven kind. Recent examples include *Neversong*, **Edge** favourite *Kine* and *PGA Tour 2K21* – okay, perhaps not that last one.

But the fact remains: spoiling someone's enjoyment of a game by letting slip too many details about the plot is an important consideration. I regularly have to resort to detailed descriptions of what is special about the implementation of a game's systems while skirting around the plot. I can understand Robert's frustration, but who wants to spoil someone's enjoyment by letting significant details

www.facebook.com/
edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with
fellow **Edge** readers

slip when discovering them for yourself is half the appeal?

At least my last but one review didn't have plot to worry about, given that it was of *Through The Darkest Of Times* in which you're part of an anti-Nazi resistance cell in wartime Berlin. Spoiler: the bad guys don't win. Though that leads to another frustration: the admittedly harrowing subject matter and the fragmented nature of cross-platform review aggregation has led to my review being one of very few on Metacritic for the platform I reviewed it on. At least **Edge** can write a review and state that a game is available on multiple platforms, not so the one-platform site. Though in the case of *Kine*, **Edge**'s review was only attributed to one format on Metacritic. So perhaps we've more in common than I thought.
Ian Thompson

Though it's far from ideal, we understand why Metacritic wouldn't attribute a review based on a PC test to other versions. Might we suggest taking a leaf out of our book – erm, mag – and adding other platforms at the top (or end) of your reviews?

Old friends

Lockdown stories #57: "What's in that box?" My wife's finger pointing to the top shelf. It looks like my original Xbox. "Do you really need this?" My wife's gaze is telling: I am 47, after all, and this console is 19 years old.

I hook the Xbox SCART cable to my old TV, plug in the wired controller, and turn it on. The Xbox buzzes into action, up comes the green loading screen. My wife barely notices – doesn't she understand how amazing this is? I scramble to find a game. *Ninja Gaiden*, now we're talking. As it boots, I remember how much I loved this game. Flashbacks of great victories, and even greater defeats. I load a 16 year old save which takes me straight to the Level 7 boss, Alma. I could never beat her – I'll show her, I'm a trained veteran these days. I've completed the entire *Dark Souls* series, *Bloodborne*, *Sekiro*, *Bayonetta*, *DMC* and *Nioh 1* and 2. Alma won't know what has hit her. I start playing: one hour passes then two, three, defeat after defeat as Alma laughs in my face. Frustration boils over. Google has no useful tips except "be good", but I notice a link showing *Ninja Gaiden* running on an Xbox One X at 60fps in 4K.

Over the next week I play *NG* on my Xbox One X and make it back to Alma. There she is, my ultimate nemesis but this time I'm prepared. The fight is tense but I am victorious, the 16 year wait is over, victory is mine. I yell out in triumph, tears stream down my face, my wife inquires from the other room, "Are you okay in there?" "Yep, better than ever, better than ever."
Brett Johansen

Runner-up for **Edge**'s Xbox Game Of The Year 2017 (poor old Microsoft). A fine choice.

Bridge over troubled water

There are fewer things more tiresome and depressing these days than the current ongoing virus crisis. One such thing would have to be the constant referring to, and complaining about, said crisis. I believe it may have taken over from talking about the weather in the small talk Hall Of Fame. So apologies for hopping on the bandwagon, but I thought it best to get it out the way early.

Things have been pretty grim for us all over the past few months, and my usual escape into the world of videogames sadly seems to be providing little to no relief from the carnage of the outside world. Never before have I had access to so many titles, either through Game Pass or my diabolically large unplayed Steam library, and yet I cannot be arsed with any one of them for more than a handful of minutes at a time. Maybe it's choice paralysis, maybe it's the depression or a reflection of the seemingly hopeless times we are living in or just simply deep rooted ennui caused by my age spiralling out of my control. Regardless of the reason I can't help but feel that my lifelong passion for gaming is slipping away from me like so many other things in life. So much so that I can't even remember the last title I bought on release, was excited for or looking forward to playing.

Most worrying of all, as a side-effect to all this, I have actually been considering cancelling my decades-long subscription to your good selves for several months now. Why read about something I can't even seem to muster the energy to play, right?

Then every month there's a day like today. The day a fresh issue plops through the letterbox is like a majestic jewel sparkling through the endless mudslides of life. Although my interest has dulled in whatever the latest new shiny thing on the horizon is, there is always something special about each issue. Take this month's issue for example. From the glorious image of the pith-helmeted *Spelunky* pug on the cover, to the wee secret sentence only we Secret Club members are privy to, this issue like each and every one is full of magical little touches of care and joy. A special mention also to whoever does the titling of letters in Dispatches. This month was particularly great as they themed the letters around something close to my heart: that cantankerous old fart Bob Dylan. Bravo!

I'm sure you get reams of sycophantic correspondence with monotonous regularity as it is, but nevertheless I just wanted to take the time to say although things are sometimes shitty, it's all about the little things you do, things that you might think no one notices, that make the biggest difference to not only me, but to many more readers out there I'm sure. It shows someone cares about their job and what they do. That someone still has passion for something, even though I no longer do, and it always makes me realise without fail that we humans aren't all that bad after all. So thank you!
Kenneth Russell

Kenneth – even after the month we've just had, it remains our very great honour and pleasure. Thanks for the reminder. ■

STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Space Invaders (Tomohiro Nishikado for Taito, 1978) has by now become a genuinely universal cultural touchstone, one you don't need to have actually played to understand. The road authority Highways England recently released a video campaign called 'Don't Be A Space Invader', to discourage tailgating, in which a blocky avatar, glowing white, of one of the iconic invaders follows a car too closely behind, threatening to cause otherworldly havoc on the motorway.

Have many young drivers today who need to be reminded of basic driving rules ever actually played *Space Invaders* or any of its legion sequels? It doesn't matter. We all know what that alien represents: it has become a potent symbol far beyond its original context. But that is not always a good thing.

The backstory of *Space Invaders* was, implicitly at least, part of the 1970s milieu of cold-war paranoia and Roswell conspiracy thinking. How did it get to the point where a single heroic cannon-pilot had to fend off waves of invading extraterrestrials? The government must have known. Indeed, an advance wave of aliens must have been here all along.

And one way that videogames develop over the subsequent decades is to become ever more elaborate conspiracy theories. The US, it turned out in the *Metal Gear Solid* games, really was secretly controlled by an elite group variously known as the Patriots or the La-li-lu-le-lo. Indeed, many videogames are vast semiotic systems designed specifically to appeal to the conspiriological mind. Every piece of information is relevant, and it all fits together neatly. This is not, needless to say, how the actual world works, where a lot of so-called information is actually rubbish and where, according to the programmers' proverb known as Hanlon's Razor, one should never attribute to malice what can be adequately explained by stupidity.

And yet Hanlon's Razor seems increasingly difficult to apply in 2020, when world leaders are actively malicious and routinely lie to our faces in easily disprovable ways. In such a world, it seems only reasonable to assume that the government is lying to you about absolutely everything.

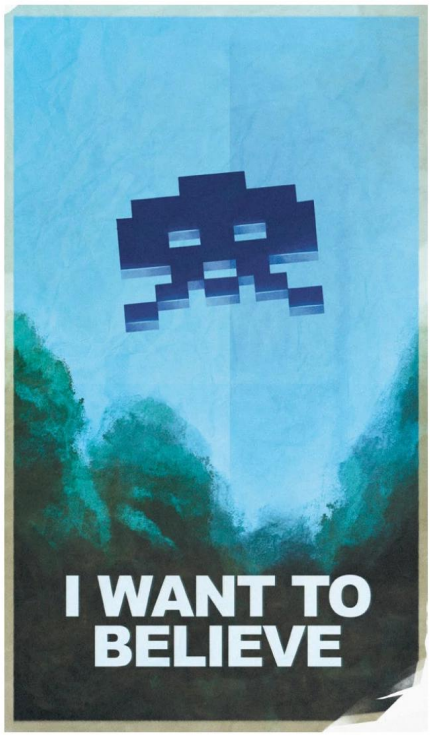

Illustration kaeru.com.ar

One way videogames develop over the subsequent decades is to become ever more elaborate conspiracy theories

But here is the entrance to the rabbit hole, which leads to believing that Hillary Clinton runs a paedophile ring out of a pizza restaurant. Indeed the notorious QAnon conspiracy, as Six to Start's Adrian Hon has brilliantly pointed out, itself functions like an augmented-reality videogame, particularly the pioneering web-based games of the late '90s, in which clues to the fictional mystery came to the player via emails or through digging around on apparently real websites. Similarly, the adept of QAnon boasts of 'doing their research' by watching YouTube and combing Reddit, and thus builds up a highly unusual alternative picture of the world.

A lot of imagination and thought is thereby exercised, and if such conspiracy theories were merely a kind of fan-fiction about a nonexistent universe, they would be admirable constructs. But a conspiracy theory is not a conspiracy theory without its insistent truth-claim: this is how the world actually is. And to apply that mindset indiscriminately can lead to very bad places.

To be sure, conspiracy theories are attractive. They make narrative sense out of a world that is ordinarily just one damn random thing after another. Wouldn't it be reassuring to think that, somewhere, some tiny group of clever people really were able to direct events? And it can't be denied that history is full of successful conspiracies that actually happened. Osama Bin Laden and friends conspired to fly planes into the Twin Towers. The Allies conspired to trick the Germans into thinking they were going to be landing elsewhere than Normandy.

On the other hand, history is also full of completely fabricated conspiracy theories that tend to lead in only one direction, the same direction in which a naive victim of the modern YouTube algorithm will inevitably be sucked. It is the oldest conspiracy theory of all and the one into which new idealists can still all too easily fall: blame Jews for everything.

Videogames are not responsible for all this, of course, but it is worth remembering that they have trained us to interpret worlds that hang together much more logically than the chaotic one we actually live in. And yes, our governments might still be lying to us most of the time — but probably not about space invaders. If Donald Trump knew about alien visitors, he wouldn't be able to help blurting it out.

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

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SAM BARLOW

Unreliable Narrator

Exploring stories in games and the art of telling tales

Detective videogames are all the rage. But haven't they always been? Even before video, games loved murder. Yes, Cluedo, but also curios such as occult novelist and boardgame designer Dennis Wheatley's popular 'dossiers'. Each dossier contained a case file and pieces of physical evidence, along with a sealed envelope holding the solution.

When videogames came along, the synergies were obvious and the subject matter stood out next to the colourful early arcade games. The box for *The Vera Cruz Affair* promised "the sordid underworld of detectives, pimps and prostitutes" alongside an age rating of ten years and up. Infocom's *Suspect* gave players a socialite's costume ball, while Magnetic Scroll's *Corruption* threw in insider trading, cheating spouses and cocaine.

These games resembled the Agatha Christie whodunnits that popularised the detective story – players would run and re-run their clockwork simulations to eke out an understanding of events and solve their elaborate puzzles.

Detective stories are a fascinating form. Their audience actively works to imagine unseen events, their participation more conscious than with other fiction. The format lends itself to the limitations of games. Remember *BioShock*? A loosely sketched protagonist with a simple drive to investigate. Rooms full of objects and bodies ('crime scenes'). Collecting pre-recorded testimonies and combing through piles of environmental storytelling ('evidence'). All culminating in a cutscene where the puzzle is explained.

If the Infocom detective games matched the puzzle box appeal of Christie, the '*Shocks* (and their ilk, such as *Gone Home*) are closer to the second evolution of the detective story, the how-dunnit. Exemplified by the TV show Columbo, these stories show the audience *who*dunnit first. They watch to see the detective figure it out, and enjoy the drama of the murderer's attempt to evade justice. In these games, if we're ahead of our protagonist in figuring things out, that's just dramatic-irony gravy. It's less about the puzzle and more about immersion in the drama.

Illustration kaeru.com.ar

The pleasure of a howdunnit is in helping put together a story. Narrative sudoku. Rolling up our brain sleeves

A more conscious take on the howdunnit is the *Phoenix Wright* series. Here, the villain is shown to the player, or at least deduced quickly. The game is about walking into a courtroom knowing who did it but not how, then pratfalling before the judge in order to put enough holes in an alibi. The pleasure of a howdunnit is in helping put together a perfect story. Narrative sudoku. Rolling up our brain sleeves and thinking a story into shape.

Thank you, then, to Lucas Pope for making the sudoku analogy so palpable in *The Return Of The Obra Dinn*, one of the nouvelle vague of indie detective games. Its genius was not in asking players to solve a single, complex murder, but instead 60 mini-murders. For each, a simple drop-down asks you to select who-died and how-died. As you whittle the list of unknowns down, it is inevitable you will find yourself in the sudoku headspace of solving several neighbouring answers by logical inference rather than deductive reasoning. *Obra Dinn* is the essence of a howdunnit: the fun of both observing and imagining very carefully.

After the howdunnit came the third evolution of the detective story: the *why*dunnit. It doesn't care about puzzles and isn't that concerned with how. Rather it wants to peer deeply into the mind of its killer. This is the template for the Nordic noir boom and serial killer films. Sometimes these stories turn their lens on the detective themselves. Like many modern stories, they are denser, less structured and care most for character. As games have embraced the open world template this generation, so detective videogames have mirrored this. In my *Her Story*, the whodunnit and howdunnit were the hook. Once pulled in, the real meat of the game was asking 'why,' and plunging players into a character study.

As games offer up islands, continents and whole cities to explore, the open detective game expands its scope inward. *Disco Elysium* is a True Detective of videogames, devoting its energies to the exploration of its amnesiac detective and the world that broke him – the solution to its murder is just a punctuation mark for the character's self-discovery. *Disco*'s detective gameplay is a great structure to justify listening to lots of people talk, including the voices inside your head.

Maybe it's this that makes detective games so wonderful. They make a mechanic out of listening, when other games are only interested in the sound of their protagonist's own one-liners.

Sam Barlow is the founder of NYC-based Half Mermaid Productions. He can be found on Twitter at @mrsambarlow

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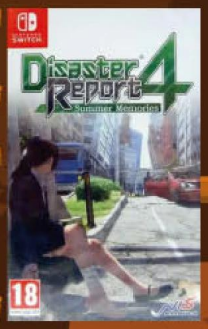

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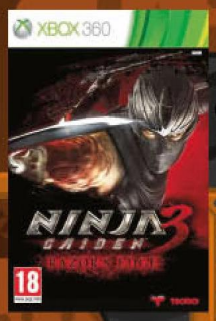

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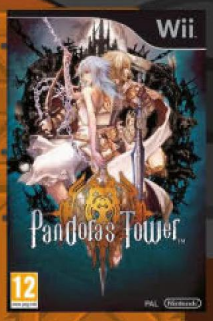

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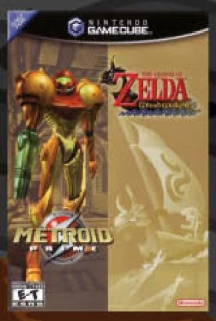

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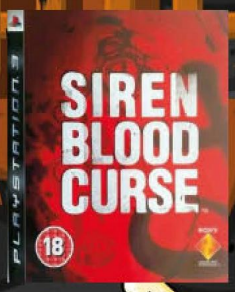

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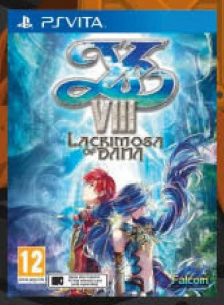

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HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

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

And they're all cowards

When we talk about art imitating life – how it evolves in response to the societal anxieties of the time – it's rare we do so in reference to games. That's partly because a single mention of a certain p-word from a critic or journalist seems to send industry spokespeople into paroxysms of denial. In most cases, that reluctance is born of commercial concerns: the cost of making games isn't coming down, and so developers and publishers hedge their bets in the hope that they won't put anyone off. Even if that includes appealing to that oh-so-vocal minority that rails against any game that attempts to address real-world concerns.

Then again, there are ways and means of sneaking ideas past people's preconceptions. There's a strong allegorical bent to several of this month's Hype crop. None more so than *Animal Farm* (p40): a bold (some might say foolhardy) attempt to adapt the fable for modern audiences in the form of a narrative/strategy sim hybrid. Creative director Imre Jele insists there's a market for such a game; having brought his experience growing up in communist Hungary to bear, it's fair to give Jele the benefit of the doubt. Either way, it's certainly not pretending it's apolitical.

Likewise, *Militsioner*, (p48) from Russia's aptly named Tallboys. The studio looks to *The Last Guardian* for inspiration, though the titular character, a colossal symbol of the Stalinist era, isn't nearly as adorable as Trico. Here is a Big Brother that you're acutely aware is always watching you (it's a good month for Orwell fans, clearly). Elsewhere, *Little Nightmares 2* (p32) shifts the series' metaphorical focus from the dangers of consumption to escapism. Still, if you're determined to use videogames purely as an escape, then there's always *Teardown* (p44), a game about smashing up voxel buildings and looting them. Surely no real-world parallels could possibly be drawn from that…

MOST WANTED

Hyrule Warriors: Age Of Calamity Switch
Releasing a game with *that* subtitle in 2020 – et tu, Nintendo? This follow-up to arguably the finest *Musou* crossover is also a *BOTW* prequel, rewinding 100 years to relive a conflict that – spoilers – doesn't end well for the good guys.

Medal Of Honor: Above And Beyond Rift
That title suggests Zampella and West are in confident mood as Respawn's founders return to the FPS series 18 years after co-designing *Allied Assault*. A chance to reinvigorate *COD*'s former rival in VR.

Empire Of Sin PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Brenda and John Romero are about to make you their snitch as their *XCOM*-with-gangsters strategy suits up for December. It promises a lavish vision of Prohibition-era Chicago, a world where the rules for what is and isn't permitted should be rather easier to follow.

HYPE

LITTLE NIGHTMARES 2

Tarsier's grisly bedtime fable escapes to the big city

Developer	Tarsier Studios
Publisher	Bandai Namco
Format	PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Origin	Sweden
Release	February 11

Child's play isn't just for fun. Sometimes it can be a survival strategy, a response to environments that frighten because they simply aren't built for the body you inhabit. Thus the creeping heart of Tarsier's *Little Nightmares*: a series that casts you as a lost child in a world designed not just for grown-ups, but grown-ups as a child might see them – huge and distorted by perspective, the grotesque masters of spaces that dwarf and entrap you.

To move through those spaces you must play around with them, always at the risk of being caught and punished. "A door is such a mundane object for adults, but for kids – almost by necessity, they have to turn it into a game," senior narrative designer **David Mervik** tells us. "They have to leap off the couch and grab the handle and somehow manage to swing it open. It's kind of the cornerstone of our game, the fun of that, though it's not much fun to be in the *Little Nightmares* world." The sequel, which is being made by a much larger and more confident team, only deepens that mixture of whimsy and dread. It trades the first game's seaborne abattoir for *Limbo*-esque forests and a shivering Pale City, stained by the glare of flickering televisions. There's a new star, the paper-bag-wearing Mono, with original protagonist Six tagging along as an AI character – a recipe for slightly more elaborate puzzles. "We have a dedicated team working on our companion AI and they've spent a lot of time giving her a personality, her own motivations, and I think that comes across when you play," level and technical designer **Matthew Compher** explains. "She's not just a drone following you around." Like *Ico*'s Yorda, Six has a degree of autonomy, sometimes leading, sometimes hanging back, sometimes holding Mono's hand and sometimes hovering over an object you need.

Together, you embark on a wordless quest to reach the source of a mysterious broadcast – the setting's denizens appear in thrall to this transmission, while the televisions seem to serve as a means of teleportation. Naturally, Tarsier is reluctant to go into details. "The main theme is escapism – that cat's out of the bag – but it's always about the variation on the theme," Mervik notes. "The greed and consumption [theme] of the first game was present in so many different ways. Eating flesh was one. So yeah, the surprise really is in how escapism is presented."

In key respects, *Little Nightmares 2* follows firmly in its predecessor's footsteps: there's the same marvellously intricate "dollhouse" perspective, the same devouring shadows, the same debts to Tarsier's old gig *LittleBigPlanet* in the emphasis on physics in puzzles. ▶

Monsters are the product of close collaboration, rather than one department handing off to another. "You can't have a nice-looking monster if it doesn't play well," Carstensen notes

Above all, this is still a game about living alongside monstrous adults, not just defeating or evading them but shadowing them through their lairs as they go about their lives. "Like in the first game, you'll see these monsters doing their daily chores, they do have a life other than just like hunting you down," associate producer **Camilla Carstensen** says. "And we like our monsters to have these small ticks and oddities, because that's what creates a personality and also makes you connect to them."

The menagerie includes a stitched-together, shotgun-wielding Hunter and a spectral Thin Man, who paces the city's streets like negative space incarnate. The worst we've seen so far, however, is the Teacher, an unblinking harridan with an extending neck. "I believe that the Hunter was more based on a prototype, whereas the Teacher, she originated from a drawing,"

"The game and the wrapping are born of the ugliness of the real world"

Carstensen goes on. "Once we have an idea, we iterate on its design, and then we add layers of personality to these characters. That can be a very long and painful process, at least the art part of it – hundreds of sketches of these characters until we find something that's good. It's kind of like getting to know somebody, because we need to figure out what makes this creature tick."

The location design is part of that process – by the time you see a monster, you should have guessed its form and habits from the grim contents of its home. Creating interiors that are navigable yet not designed for the player's character is a "really delicate balance", Compher acknowledges. "Scale is really, really difficult and it's something we struggled with in the first game. Our artists work closely with designers to get that scale right, but it's a unique challenge because most of the time in videogames, the world is meant for you."

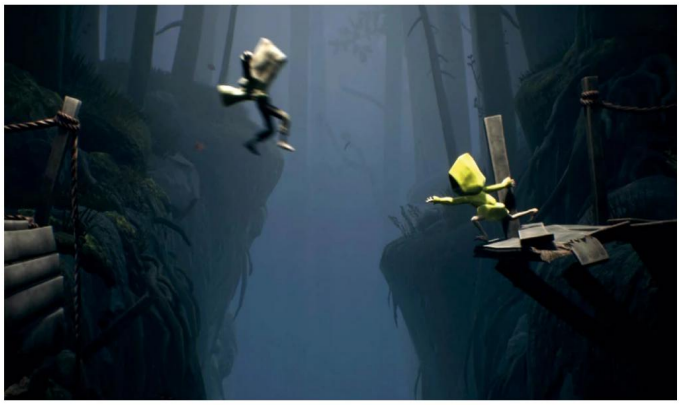
Somewhat to our shock, Tarsier doesn't regard *Little Nightmares* as a horror franchise. "I think the word horror comes with a lot of baggage," Compher observes. "I've always felt it was more a suspenseful adventure. Maybe you get a feeling of unease or tension, but I never really felt like we intended to make the player feel scared." Mervik is similarly wary of the label's associations. "It's terrifying. It's just not things jumping out of wardrobes and violins screeching in the background."

Resisting the designation of "horror game" perhaps makes Tarsier more able to walk the tricky line between alluding to real-world atrocities and reducing them to grisly mood devices: the first game included depictions of suicide and imagery of discarded shoes reminiscent of the Holocaust. "This is a fantasy world, but the game and the wrapping are born of the ugliness of the real world," Mervik comments of the latter scene. "It's not a reference to it, but of course it would be disingenuous to claim that we don't know about things like that." The games seldom portray violence – rather, they show you its aftermath, which is both less immediately disturbing and more powerful, "because your imagination is doing the work". That said, Mervik adds, "if you're constantly going, 'Hang on though, this might also be a problem...' you end up doing nothing, if you take it to the nth degree. And that's not to say we don't care or we're not aware that those things exist. We don't do anything wantonly or to be edgy or to offend."

Towards the end of our interview, a very obvious question occurs to us: do the makers of *Little Nightmares* have children, and how does that change their understanding of their game? Compher remarks that art director Per Bergman has used his son as a reference for certain animations, but is uncertain about the impact of his own experiences of fatherhood. "I'm not sure I've consciously considered the relationship between having a kid and how we make the game. I'd guess it makes it easier to imagine how to make playful moments, but I don't know if it's had a huge effect." We're not sure we want him to ponder it too deeply. The jury's out on how much *Little Nightmares 2* changes about its predecessor, but in an industry dedicated to giving the player stature and agency, few studios are this good at making you feel small. ■

Jump scares

The original *Little Nightmares* was faulted for its controls, particularly when you were trying to complete a platform puzzle with something breathing down your neck. The new game features unobtrusive assists to help you land those jumps, gameplay programmer Fabian Loayza tells us, and Tarsier has also thought long and hard about the problem of depth perception when viewing a 3D environment from one side. Six feels like a key ingredient here – she doesn't only guide you toward certain objects in puzzles, but serves as a moving reference point during platforming and stealth. "We made it our top priority to respond to the feedback we got from the first game," Loayza comments.



TOP Based on the demo, there's still a strong element of trial-and-error, but the sequel seems better at communicating which places are safe and where to go. ABOVE "We're not getting into real history," Mervik says of the original's uglier moments. "But it's always born of a real place – it comes from us and how we feel about the world." MAIN Being without dialogue puts stress on environments to tell a story. "It's a bit like laying out a gigantic puzzle," Carstensen says

TOP Returning players will know that Six isn't always safe company. We look forward to seeing how Mono (who has demons of his own) deals with her darker side. RIGHT *Little Nightmares* has some very ardent fans. "There are people who call themselves Little Nightmares Theorists on Twitter," Mervik says. "There's people making songs about it"

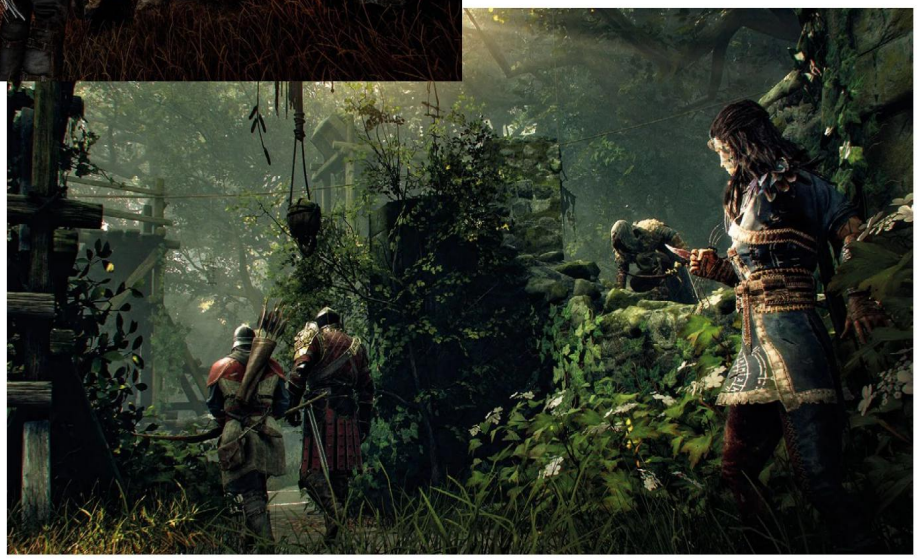
The game has a dreamily exaggerated take on English architecture during the Dark Ages, with castles much larger than it would have been possible to build

HYPE

HOOD: OUTLAWS & LEGENDS

The creators of Eve Valkyrie blend folklore with heist movie

Developer	Sumo Newcastle
Publisher	Focus Home Interactive
Format	PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Origin	UK
Release	2021



TOP **Sumo hasn't named any characters besides Robin, but we'll be surprised if we don't end up with grimdark interpretations of Friar Tuck, Maid Marian and Little John.** ABOVE **Williams is relishing the absence of loading screens on next-gen consoles. "It's pretty epic the first time you experience it, and the novelty doesn't wear off"** LEFT **O'Brien compares Robin Hood to Batman: "The hood is more important than the person underneath". Mystique aside, it's an idea that lends itself nicely to DLC costumes.** BOTTOM **The maps are a balance of multiple-route areas and chokepoints – however deviously you play, you won't be able to avoid the other team forever**

Robin Hood is the man with a thousand faces. Even laying aside his endless appearances in fiction, history teems with competing incarnations of the altruistic outlaw. There are at least five people who might have been the original Robin, with some scholars claiming it was a stock alias for any highwayman of a certain notoriety. That lack of a solid origin story explains the legend's popularity among writers, but it's also an oddly good fit for a multiplayer game where everybody wants to play the title character. Step forward *Hood: Outlaws & Legends*, a competitive infiltration game that pits all those rival Robins against each other.

Developer Sumo Newcastle is the outfit formerly known as CCP Newcastle, creator of *Eve: Valkyrie*. Acquired by Sumo in 2018, the studio was tasked with devising original IPs for a company celebrated for its thirdparty adaptations. Sumo had already considered a 'dark reimagining of Robin Hood', but it was the Newcastle team that grasped the PvP potential. "What if Robin of Loxley and Robin of Huntingdon were both around at the same time, both claiming to be Robin Hood?" studio director **Owen O'Brien** asks. "How would they prove to people who's the real Robin?"

The answer, apparently, is to form up into opposing heist crews and race to steal loot from the minions of a nameless medieval State. The game's handling of the legend mixes historical references provided by the novelist Steven McKay with the kind of viciously down-to-earth myth-making popularised by Game Of Thrones. Campier flavours of Robin such as Errol Flynn's 1938 rendition are off the menu. "There are no merry men," O'Brien tells us firmly. "And there are no men in tights."

In action, *Hood* comes across as a blend of *Hunt: Showdown*, *PayDay 2* and *Assassin's Creed*, with teams striving to ambush the AI, and each other, in a world of blind corners, deep shadows and multiple elevations. Sumo Newcastle has taken inspiration from modern heist movies when designing the game's characters, who range from tattooed cat-burglars with wrist crossbows to monkish juggernauts equipped with a ball-and-chain.

Each character has unlockable perks, an ultimate ability such as explosive arrows, and a different mode of infiltration: some shimmy up ropes or pick locks, others smash through doors with hammers. Discretion is advisable, because unlike creeps in MOBA-inspired games like *For Honor*, *Hood*'s AI guards are designed to kill you. "They react to sounds, they react to line of sight," design director **Andrew Williams** says. "They're not there as fodder." The world is largely make-believe – built around a thematic opposition between state power and the forces of myth and nature – but you can expect locations based on British landmarks such as Lindisfarne. "It's really nice to be looking for inspiration in your back garden," Williams enthuses.

While *Hood*'s ambience seems utterly cut-throat, Sumo hopes that the game's PvPvE approach will accommodate a range of both playstyles and skill levels. "Strategies that might not necessarily work on real players might allow for more exotic kills or traps against AI," Williams notes, adding, "I think there's more of an accessibility ramp in PvPvE, rather than precision and reflexes [always winning] the day." Which is not to say that accuracy counts for nothing – this is a Robin Hood game, after all. "I've seen arrow shots from halfway across the map," Williams says. Budding archers will be pleased to hear that the studio is taking full advantage of the PS5 controller's advanced haptic feedback. "A bow is the ideal showcase for this technology. We're enjoying the challenge of tuning the resistance and vibration to create something which feels authentic, but also fun."

"There are no merry men," O'Brien tells us firmly. "And there are no men in tights"

A part of us finds *Hood*'s "dark reimagining" wearisome – Robin Hood's appeal among folklorists lies partly with his sense of whimsy, after all, and the last few film adaptations have been decidedly dour. "We did go down the route of writing a couple of origin stories," O'Brien comments. "But we decided not to use them because it felt better that he – or she – is this mythical figure. You don't know who's under the hood." ■

Life after VR

Sumo Newcastle has considerable expertise in VR development from its *Eve: Valkyrie* days. Will it ever return to VR? "We've still got a lot of really cool designs for VR," Williams says, "but I think we're just happy now to be creating multiplayer games that reach a larger audience." He adds: "We're very proud of all that work, but it's just so liberating to create without constantly thinking about things like activation energy, session fatigue, simulation sickness, that trade-off between framerate and fidelity. It's nice to not have the boundaries and just say 'Okay, let's just make a great game'. That's not to say VR hasn't advanced – I think the tech today is amazing. But the accessibility still isn't up to the level of traditional gaming."

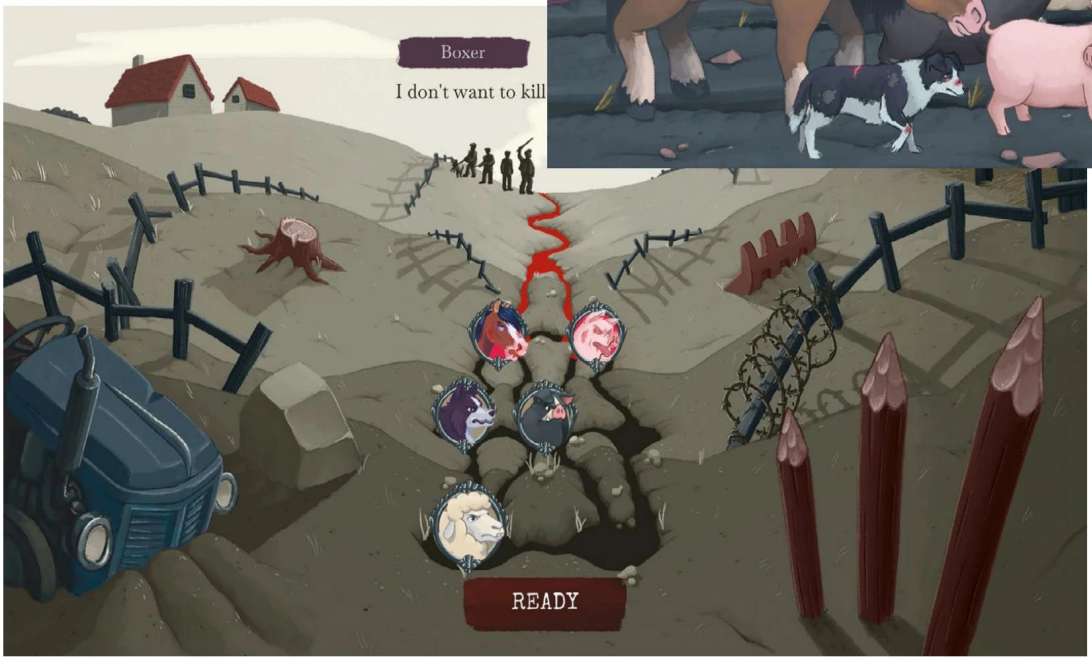
HYPE

ORWELL'S ANIMAL FARM

Nerial's videogame adaptation has certainly got legs – but how many?

Developer	Nerial
Publisher	The Dairymen
Format	Android, iOS, PC
Origin	UK
Release	Winter

The art style of *Orwell's Animal Farm* recalls 1930s animation. Alongside allegory, it's another layer of style that should help the game's real-life messages sink in that much more easily



ABOVE **Some scenes look more like a children's storybook than others do.** MAIN **You'll need to carefully preserve resources and defend the farm from attack if you are to achieve your political goals**

TOP **Animal Farm turned 75 this past August; Nerial's game is intended as an anniversary tribute.** RIGHT **Abubakar Salim, aka *Assassin's Creed Origins*' Bayek, lends his vocal talents to the game as the narrator**

ORWELL'S ANIMAL FARM

They say timing is everything – and it's hard to think of a more relevant moment for a videogame based on Animal Farm to surface. Then again, it's difficult to imagine George Orwell's satirical classic will ever go out of style, its scathing study of inequality, power and control seemingly not enough to dissuade humanity from its unbroken streak of punching itself in the face. Nerial, however, has high hopes that a videogame – in which you manage a farm-society whose success or failure pivots on the inequities of its social strata and corruptibility of its leaders – might help the message to sink in.

Adapting Orwell's classic has been a decades-old ambition for creative director **Imre Jele**, who witnessed communism at first hand growing up in Hungary. "My family was active on the 'wrong' side of politics, by the definition of the regime," Jele says. "Animal Farm was read to me with Winnie The Pooh and The Little Prince. It took years for me to find that we as an industry are ready to make it, and there's an audience ready to take it." An *incredibly* optimistic view on both counts, given Ubisoft's (recently updated) track record for handling political issues with all the grace of a baby deer with guns attached to its feet while simultaneously swearing blind it doesn't know what politics is, and much of the mainstream gaming audience's aversion to being presented with real-world issues in games.

Still, Jele hopes the part narrative, part strategy sim will find an open-minded crowd. Players must balance the farm's resources while creating alliances with characters. Choosing to side with the Stalin-inspired Napoleon or Trotsky-like Snowball is the key to managing situations and keeping the animals happy, meaning neither letting things slide into dictatorship nor revolution. "The farm is a perfect storytelling mechanism," Jele says. "You need to grow things and process them, build a windmill and all these mechanics – but they also tell the story. What happens when an animal gets tired or ill? In most games it's just a resource counter, we liked humanising those numbers. We want to provide a classic adventure game, but reflecting things on the farm, so certain numbers trigger certain storylines and vice versa."

It's a hell of an undertaking, and one that could potentially end up with a very clumsy result. Weaving player choice, for instance, into a story designed to end up at one particular outcome is a risky endeavour – should there really be a way to *win* Animal Farm? It seems counter to Orwell's original intent. But there's reason to be hopeful: Nerial is the developer behind excellent monarchical RPG *Reigns*, and Failbetter Games creative director Emily Short will lend her interactive fiction writing talents to *Orwell's Animal Farm* too. She's determined to remain faithful to the original intention of the text, while adapting it in such a way that ensures tonal verisimilitude.

Nerial insists, however, that certain changes are inevitable. "When you read a book you're already adding your own biases, and when you adapt something it's very difficult to avoid," Jele says. "We tried to keep to what's in the story, and only extend meaningfully when it made sense, asking ourselves: what would Orwell do?" Exploring what George Orwell, videogame writer, might have done meant extrapolating brief ideas. "The book uses such simple language and implies a lot of things," Jele explains. "Our job was to extend on it. In the story, it's merely referenced that the pigs used birds to spy on neighbouring farms. But if you think about the attitude of the pigs and the governments Orwell was trying to portray, they're going to spy on their own animals too. Extend this idea, and it becomes a reflection on mass surveillance in modern regimes.

> ***"We as an industry are ready to make it, and there's an audience ready to take it"***

"A good story can elevate you from sympathy to empathy, and Animal Farm does that," Jele continues. "Maybe if more people, after playing the game, choose to take part in the political discourse, and have a better view of what's happening behind the scenes, while recognising patterns of misuse of language and power around them," Jele says, "that's as noble an objective as any creative project can get."

There's a worrying suggestion there, of some games being more equal than others – but with the intentions justified, and some sharp minds behind this, perhaps the timing really is right. ■

Bloc buster

The novel Animal Farm resonated with Imre Jele as he saw the end of communist rule first hand. "I was the last generation who clapped for the big leader. I had a nice red tie and a white shirt, we were lined up, clapping. I remember the words about the enemy, the disseminators and spies who were apparently everywhere. 'It could be anyone, it could be in your family!' When I hear modern politicians talking about the press or a group of minorities, whoever they target, that's very familiar." Jele insists it is not a commentary on modern governments, however. "Our goal is to reproduce what Orwell said about that. It just so happens that his writing is painfully accurate. Read 1984 and Animal Farm and you'd think someone wrote them last year."

Developer/publisher Tuxedo Labs
Format PC
Origin Sweden
Release TBA

TEARDOWN

Smash and grab in this uniquely destructible heist game

Remember when you were young, playing videogames for the first time, and you still assumed everything was possible? Before you accepted the limitations, learned the language that discerns between interactive object and mere set dressing. It's a necessary step – after all, these things are made by people, and it's impractical to expect them to recreate the real world wholesale for every new game – but in some ways it's also a loss of innocence, a closing off of possibilities.

Playing *Teardown* is like returning to those prelapsarian days. Every inch of its levels can be destroyed, using an arsenal that includes guns and explosives but also planks, spray paint and a fire extinguisher. We encounter a door that won't open – and, on instinct, apply our shotgun to the general vicinity of the lock. A grey chunk tumbles out, and the door swings open. We strike a wall with our sledgehammer, and the plaster chips away, exposing the brickwork beneath. A bomb carves a rough-edged hole that's big enough to crawl through; three more, and the entire building collapses in on itself.

Teardown is the kind of game that, even while playing it, we can't quite believe is real. Especially when you factor in that this is largely a two-man operation: **Dennis Gustafsson** is responsible for programming and game design, and Emil Bengtsson for the level design and voxel art. (This is just the beginning of their roles – the game's credits eventually give up on listing off the pair's contributions and summarise with a shrugged, "bit of everything".)

For Gustafsson, it's the result of a decades-long fascination with physics simulation. He co-founded game physics middleware firm Meqon in 2001, bouncing between everything from astronomy visualisation to fluid simulation before starting Mediocre in 2010 – a mobile studio specialising in, yes, physics-driven games. "We released an iOS and Android game called *Smash Hit*, seven years ago now," Gustafsson says. "That was the first attempt to build a game around destruction."

He started work on the tech behind Teardown's destructible voxel-based environments back in 2017. "It grew and grew from there, but it was still just a technology," Gustafsson says. "There was no game in mind when I started doing this." He and Bengtsson spent over a year toying with concepts. "We actually gave up a couple of times." And then, in spring of 2019, "I finally got this idea that destruction should be used for shortcuts."

The result is not quite like any other game we've ever played. Each mission is its own heist, with multiple objectives scattered across a map the size of a small industrial

ABOVE **You're free to find your own uses for the game's tools. Spray paint can be handy for marking up your planned route, or just a spot of petty vandalism before you start demolishing**

> ***"So far I don't think I've seen the same solution to any mission twice"***

LEFT **The game world is made up of chunky voxels, but thanks to its deployment of everything from depth of field to ray-tracing, it can be stunningly pretty.**
BELOW **The map screen is a vital tool, giving info on each objective and reflecting the results of your destruction in realtime**

Objectives aren't always static – this one is inside a truck. Which would be great, except for the shipping containers blocking your path

estate. You're free to explore and forcibly remodel to your heart's content – until the moment you touch the first objective. This triggers a one-minute countdown to grab them all and reach the extraction point.

Preparation is the key to success. You pick a route between the points and connect them up in advance, by removing walls, readying getaway vehicles and making smart use of your tools. Which is how we end up in the cab of a mobile crane, smashing its hook into a shipping container to drag it, and the objective it holds, to a more convenient spot.

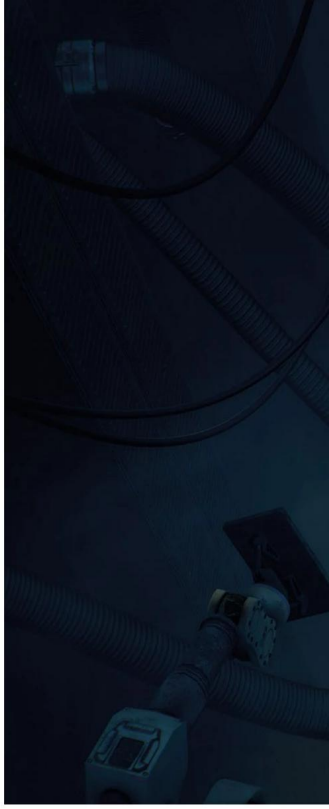
Sometimes this can feel like cheating, but that's all part of the plan. "Even if players solve it faster than we intended, I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing because they're going to feel smart, like they came up with a good solution, and that's more important," Gustafsson says. "So far I don't think I've seen the same solution to any mission twice."

Teardown takes a sledgehammer to years of internalised expectations. Understanding that this novelty could quickly wear thin, the game's genius comes from providing restrictions of the kind that so often help creativity blossom. If, like us, you've been admiring Twitter videos of its smash-ups for the past year, then know this: *Teardown*'s destruction is anything but mindless. ■

Under construction

Teardown is targeting an Early Access release this year. Along with the sandbox and challenge modes to which we've already lost too many hours, that will include the first chapter of the game's campaign, with more varied missions, a story to tie them together, and a progression system so players can unlock and upgrade tools. Don't expect the full game – there are three chapters planned, and their exact contents are something Gustafsson wants to develop with the help of the community. "We're still exploring what type of missions we can do," he says. The plan is to test ideas before implementing them fully. "It's not really how a lot of companies do Early Access these days."

Developer/publisher Chump Squad
Format PC
Origin US
Release Spring



LAB RAT

Kine's creator returns with a lockdown-inspired puzzler

Lockdown has been more productive for some than others. For **Gwen Frey**, it's been something more – the inspiration behind her follow-up to last year's wonderful *Kine*. Built on that game's codebase, it's a *Sokoban*-style puzzler which casts you as a human test subject, put through a series of challenges by a machine-learning algorithm. The play space is cramped, with the player character trapped within four walls, as two computer monitors loom large in the background – reflecting Frey's own desk.

"I felt like I was going stir crazy," Frey says. "I'm stuck here, and the only way I can communicate with anybody else is through this computer in front of me. I was like, 'What is life like right now? It's like being picked up and dangled like a rat in a cage.' It all tumbled out of that feeling – the feeling of 2020."

Given *Kine* launched less than a year ago, *Lab Rat* seems to have come together remarkably quickly – all the more so when Frey tells us she'd initially started working on a completely different project. "It was going to be a tactics game, but it didn't immediately click for me. And if I wanted to make it, I knew I'd have to scale up, and I would have to go after funding." When COVID-19 hit, Frey realised that getting money and a team together would be even more difficult; as

Unlike *Kine*, the puzzles aren't all presented in a linear sequence. You'll be able to explore branching paths for optional, more difficult challenges

Much of *Lab Rat*'s design is already in place, Frey says. The next focus for her team is working the metrics into the narrative

Le Slo's role is exclusively about "making interesting puzzles" Frey explains. Thanks to his determination to build clever conundrums around the surprise events that are sporadically introduced, the game has kept on growing

pandemic restrictions arrived, she contacted her friend, experimental puzzle designer Lucas Le Slo, to discuss a potential lockdown game jam. One of Le Slo's ideas quickly stood out, and Frey decided to riff on it, using her code from *Kine* to produce a prototype. "It was... jeez, a week and a half, maybe?" she recalls. "I already had a grid-based system, and so a lot of the stuff I needed was there. The reason it happened so quickly was because initially we believed we were going to make a tiny game-jam game, and with the base I had, I could just polish it up, change things around a little bit and fit it to this."

"I had a lot of opinions about Silicon Valley culture and tech culture in general"

With much of the technical heavy lifting already out of the way, the only problems were creative ones. "It was just about figuring out the vibe, the feel, what we actually wanted the game to be," Frey explains. "I knew I had a lot of opinions about Silicon Valley culture and tech culture in general, and I wanted to make a story that was about that." Having played and loved Zachtronics' visual novel *Eliza* – which centres on that same subject – Frey contacted its creator Matthew Seiji Burns in April, and he's now on board as *Lab Rat*'s writer.

As they discussed the story, Burns suggested hiring a voice actor for the role of Sara, the AI in charge of setting the puzzles. Your goal in each of them is to manoeuvre large blocks, or keys, towards a goal – although you can only grab the side which matches the colour of your character. This, in some cases, means getting deliberately zapped by electricity, your avatar recoiling in pain as the beams hit them. Sara isn't malevolent, Frey explains, just misguided: "It's trying to create entertainment for humanity but without any kind of understanding of what it is to be human." And, in a delightfully meta twist, it's Frey herself who will be commenting on the player's performance, allowing her the satisfaction of berating players for their failure to solve the puzzles she's set.

At times it seems Frey's game will be as painful to fellow puzzle game designers as to its hapless test subject. "Losing about 50 per cent of the people who purchase your game within an hour, especially if you're in something like a Humble Bundle, is pretty standard," she admits. But it's also a game that's played for laughs. Between puzzles, there are multiple-choice polls – with analytics updating in real time to reflect the choices of other players – and the AI will often comically misinterpret those choices, changing the game in surprising ways. "It's one of those 'be careful what you wish for' situations," Frey says mischievously. We'll discover what she means early next year – and if *Kine* is anything to go by, we'll willingly go back into confinement to find out. ■

Frey's voiceover will adjust to the answers you and other players have chosen. "I can record different VO for each plausible response, so that if option A is winning at a given time, we'll play one VO, and if B is winning we'll play another"

GlaDOS the company

As the story progresses, Sara will manipulate the game to turn the puzzle mechanics on their head. A film-noir aesthetic, for example, will make colour-matching more challenging, while another chamber will feature guns. Given the comic tone, the dystopian setting and the presence of an AI mocking a human test subject, it's no surprise that *Lab Rat* is already being likened to a certain firstperson puzzler. Are they welcome, we ask? "I *love Portal*," Frey says. "I don't want to copy it, and I don't think I am. The motivations for it came from a very different place. But being compared to one of the best puzzle games of all time doesn't really offend me in any way. So I'm okay with it."

Developer/publisher Tallboys
Format PC
Origin Russia
Release TBA

MILITSIONER

In post-Soviet Russia, you watch Big Brother

Ever get the feeling you're being watched? It's an awful sensation: a nauseating prickle on the back of your neck, a burning about the ears. Usually, it's just a feeling, but the horror of *Militsioner* is that it's not just your mind playing tricks.

The eponymous Militsioner is unnerving, to say the least. The gigantic policeman sits on the outskirts of the post-Soviet town, legs drawn up, arms resting upon his knees. And he just *stares* at you. You must use physics-based puzzling to MacGyver an escape. Militsioner's objective is to observe your every movement – and, when your getaway seems assured, to slowly reach down with a huge hand, thumb and forefinger primed in a pincer of annoyance, to arrest your victory.

"Militsioner has an opinion on any situation that intersects with his job obligations"

It's terrifying stuff, but the developers would have us believe that Militsioner isn't an object of *total* revulsion, despite the protagonist repeatedly referring to him as "disgusting".

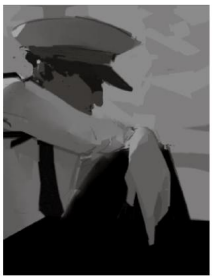
"In Russian culture, there's a character called Uncle Styopa," explains **Vladimir Semenets**, art lead and game designer. The freakishly tall, kind-hearted policeman was a symbol of the value of the militsioner during the Stalinist era – 'copaganda', essentially. "After several months of searching for an idea, we saw a work by the artist Andrey Surnov, titled Rest. We were struck by the depth and relevance of the giant policeman's character in our country, and for us personally." This is no monster you're dealing with. He thinks, eats and sleeps like anyone else – opportunities you can use to make a run for it. "Militsioner is first and foremost a human," Semenets continues, "and it is his human qualities we want to show."

Indeed, while balancing ladders across rooftops or climbing onto moving trucks, Tallboys hopes you'll be developing a kind of relationship with Militsioner. "Initially, the game was planned as an immersive sim with elements of stealth," Semenets says. *Prey: Mooncrash* was one early influence (*Militsioner* keeps the idea of a shrinking window of opportunity for escape, splitting its deadline into days), but now Tallboys is looking to the works of Team Ico for inspiration – specifically *The Last Guardian* and its central non-playable entity, Trico, we're told.

It's already clear that the team is putting special effort into his behaviours and facial expressions: there's humour, even, in the way Militsioner's eyes narrow suspiciously as he spots you trying to stack crates, then boggle as the penny drops. "He reacts to what happens in the city and with the player," says **Vyacheslav Petska**, AI programmer. "He has an opinion on any situation that intersects with his job obligations." He's a more complex character, then, than the various regular-sized policemen around town: "The rest of the police are depersonalised," Semenets explains. "They are the very institution of the police, with its obvious flaws, while the Militsioner is a person with his own fears and views."

There's a worry that this is a game setting out to 'both sides' a far-right figure. To us, however, it's plain that Tallboys is simply being very careful not to say too much here. Understandable – not only because so much of *Militsioner*'s allure is in its mystery (why are you escaping? Where to? Is Militsioner even real?) but because the game has already attracted the ire of Russia's state-owned media, which has drawn its own conclusions about the developer's "Russophobic" intent.

For anyone with even a surface knowledge of the country's cultural history, however, this is the latest in a long-held artistic tradition of using symbolism to turn a subtle lens upon the past. The omnipresent, all-seeing Militsioner – friend, foe, a neighbour fit into the form of something else entirely – stares unblinkingly. We wonder what we will see when we start staring back. ■



Home is where the art is

When it comes to the game's post-Soviet environments, it's a case of 'write what you know'. "This is my country," Vladimir Semenets says. "I know it and I want to tell the world about it. It is unique and has its own strong visual language. The prefix 'post-Soviet' is added, because Russia has frozen in time – it does not move, as well as our Militsioner." As to why you're escaping a provincial town and not, say, a secure unit of some description? It's about nurturing a "bittersweet" feeling in the game, we're told. "I want to make it feel like the player is running away from his own home. He grew up here; this is his homeland, even if it feels like a prison."

TOP LEFT **Sements sees Militsioner as "a mirror of the player. First I saw the burden of responsibility, then the fear of not being free, the existence of conscience and that it can crush you like a giant."**
ABOVE **Police cars appear to be based on the VAZ-2105 USSR models.**
LEFT **"Even a hint of emotion adds humanity to a being," design lead Dmitry Shevchenko says, invoking Team Ico's Colossi. "They have a single emotion frozen in place, but even that gives them a sense of intelligence"**

MONSTER HUNTER RISE

Developer/publisher Capcom **Format** Switch **Origin** Japan **Release** March 26

And rise you will, as *Monster Hunter* gets a thrilling injection of verticality. Taking a cue from *Breath Of The Wild*, it now lets you scale (or goofily sprint up) any surface; the Wirebug, meanwhile, helps you grapple across canyons while lending you an extra evasive option in combat. You can get around equally quickly on the ground thanks to a new canine mount, which also provides offensive backup as your Palico lends healing support. And given *MH4U* launched alongside an upgraded 3DS, we wouldn't bet against the above date heralding the arrival of a much-rumoured new Switch model.

FINAL FANTASY XVI

Developer/publisher Square Enix **Format** PC, PS5 **Origin** Japan **Release** TBA

"The following content is captured on PC" wasn't the best of starts to Sony's PS5 showcase. Within four minutes, we understood why it took the risk. Exclusivity confusion aside, the news that several of the team behind the revitalised *FFXIV* are involved – not least producer Naoki Yoshida – bodes extremely well. And if the dark pseudo-medieval aesthetic (and *those* accents) garnered a mixed reaction, the fluid combat looks a cut above its predecessor's.

MONSTER HUNTER STORIES 2: WINGS OF RUIN

Developer/publisher Capcom **Format** Switch
Origin Japan **Release** Summer

A double dose of *MonHun*? Don't mind if we do. This Switch sequel to the turn-based 3DS spin-off looks seriously pretty – though it had us imagining another *Zelda* crossover. Capcom promises an "emotional" narrative, as your kindly monster tamer investigates a mass disappearance of Rathalos.

THE CLIMB 2

Developer Crytek **Publisher** Oculus
Format Quest 2, Rift **Origin** Germany **Release** Winter

This follow-up to Crytek's clambering sim is an attractive showcase for Oculus's Quest 2, with skyscrapers – including what looks suspiciously like The Gherkin – as well as rock faces. The new headset's Facebook integration leaves us more unsettled, however: we'd rather make this climb untethered.

NOUR: PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD

Developer Terrifying Jellyfish **Publisher** Panic
Format PC, PS5 **Origin** US **Release** TBA

TJ Hughes' interactive food vignettes are perhaps the last thing we needed, given the lockdown weight we're carrying. Between assembling doughnut katamari and redefining the tower burger, the thought of these treats in 8K on PS5 has us drooling. Panic, too – the Playdate makers will now publish.

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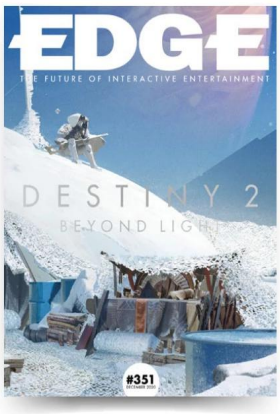

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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY

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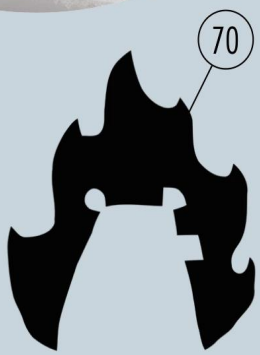

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Game *Destiny 2: Beyond Light*
Developer/publisher Bungie
Origin US
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Stadia, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release November 10

I G H T T U R E

With Beyond Light, Bungie reshapes Destiny 2 for a new generation

By Alex Wiltshire

Making *Destiny 2* sounds painful. Three years of expansions have seen it grow into a vast sprawl of multifarious activities, demanding an install of over 120GB on PS4 and developer Bungie's constant maintenance so the monster-shooting never ends. Bungie knows there won't be a *Destiny 3*. "We sometimes think of *Destiny* like running Disneyland, and there's only so much space inside the Disneyland – but unlike Disneyland, it doesn't close at 10 o'clock at night and is always running," **Mark Noseworthy**, general manager of *Destiny 2*, tells us. And now, on the cusp of a new generation of consoles, it's only halfway through its life. As *Destiny 2*'s attractions age; as Bungie stretches its resources to keep them going; and as the next generation raises expectations for the scale and fidelity of games another notch, something has to change.

So, on November 10, the very day the next generation begins with the launch of Xbox Series X and S, *Destiny 2* will also begin a new future with the release of *Beyond Light*. On one hand, this expansion will kick off a new three-year cycle of storylines, magnificent sci-fi vistas and tight gunplay. On the other, it will be a far smaller game than it is today, because Bungie's plan to prepare *Destiny 2* for another three years is to cut a swathe of it away. Four entire planets, a star-eating spaceship and a farm, as well as all the activities that took place in them; three narrative campaigns, five raids, seven strikes, quests for guns, multiplayer maps, and four weapon forges. All this will be deposited into what Bungie calls the Destiny Content Vault, where all these pursuits will abstractly sit until Bungie decides to 'unvault' it: to pick pieces of world, pursuits, arenas, and make them playable again.

"We want *Destiny* to be sustainable for us to be able to actually develop," says Noseworthy as he introduces a new metaphor for the experience of *Destiny 2*'s development. "There are limits to how big and complex the game can get, and if we just constantly add more and more and more, eventually the balloon just pops, right? So, hey, let's take a little bit of air out of the balloon, so we could put some new fresh air in."

If Bungie gets this right, it will have solved a long-held problem which many other live games are currently facing: the ever-increasing pressure of administering years of accumulated content and bloated installs. If it's wrong, then *Destiny*'s appeal really is wrapped up in its entirety, and Bungie faces a playerbase hot with the indignation of having treasured places and things to do – that it paid for – taken away from it. So, yes. Making *Destiny* sounds painful.

Naturally, *Beyond Light* will add lots of new content. It'll introduce a whole new destination in which to shoot monsters. Europa, icy moon of Jupiter, is a free-roam space where players will fight Eramis, Kell of Darkness, who has reunited the Fallen houses and poses a new existential threat to humankind. There, players will discover the first new class-based powers to be introduced to the series since the first *Destiny*'s The Taken King expansion introduced Void powers in 2015. Stasis is about freezing enemies to gain spatial control and make them susceptible to massive damage, and with it will come a suite of new ways to tweak and customise the way they work.

Beyond Light will also add old content. It'll bring back the Cosmodrome, an expanse of Old Russia littered with artefacts of humanity's ancient push into space that was the set for the opening of the first *Destiny*, as well as the introduction of *Destiny 2*'s free-to-play content. And, alongside a new raid, *Beyond Light* will also reopen the Vault of Glass, the puzzle box of ingenious and demanding team-based mechanics which introduced *Destiny*'s take on MMO raids. Vault of Glass is a piece of unashamed hardcore fan service: a chance to revisit the place where *Destiny* truly found its voice. But it's also a meta statement about the reality of a vault: that as well as putting stuff into one, you take it out of it, too. "The onus is on us to make vaulting content fucking cool," says creative director **Luke Smith**. "That's why the first thing that we're unvaulting is – it's goofy to say – the Vault of Glass, one of the prized possessions in *Destiny*'s vault, if you will."

Vault of Glass shows that treasured things won't disappear forever, and its reappearance will be cool because it'll be led by a storyline, not simply turning up from out of the blue. "What goes into the vault, or comes out of it, is defined by a combination of things, but it starts with where the story needs to go," Smith says. Things coming out will make some kind of sense, while things going in will be heralded by events that lead to their disappearance. "We want to tell this story ▶

"IF WE JUST CONSTANTLY ADD MORE AND MORE AND MORE, EVENTUALLY THE BALLOON JUST POPS, RIGHT?"

The Titan's Stasis subclass is called Behemoth. Its melee ability, Shiver Strike, involves launching into enemies and punching them, sending them flying and slowing nearby enemies

DEEP FREEZE

Each class' take on Stasis will reflect a different facet of the concept of making things cold. Warlock Shadebinders focus on freezing and shattering enemies, while Hunter Revenants slow them by throwing icy shuriken and blades, and the Titan Behemoth can build ice walls and gain crystal armour and enhanced melee attacks. And from these, Aspects and Fragments will allow all kinds of secondary effects and bonuses. "Stasis is all about controlling the battlefield, which means it will impact the meta," Smith explains. But while it's easy to see how fun it'll be to slow and freeze AI enemies, these effects are harder to gauge in PVP. It's rarely fun to find oneself immobilised and open to attack during an intense match.

Beyond Light's Europa setting is bleak and beautiful in turn, and home to ancient human colonies and a Braytech engineering facility. It was originally planned for 2015's The Taken King expansion

of this evolving world, and to do that things need to change," Noseworthy says. "It means you have to have something happen which now affects the world and makes it different, and that results in things no longer being available in some cases, right? Like if you blow up a planet."

In other words, vaulting could be a way to tell dynamic and meaningful stories in live online games. Since the vault's announcement, *Destiny* has delivered through the current Season of Arrivals' quests a narrative that is reflecting the coming changes. Characters on the planets which will be devoured by the coming Darkness (a big bad – the biggest bad? – which has been foreshadowed since the first *Destiny*) have been wrapping up their storylines, some surprisingly poignantly, such as that of the truculent scientist Asher Mir. The atmosphere of the game has become sombre, but also pregnant with the exciting promise of true change which until now *Destiny 2* – like most MMOs – has struggled to reflect, such as that time the Tower hub area was nearly razed by a 3000-kilometre long Cabal spaceship falling on it, and yet bears only a few superficial scratches that changed nothing before it was time for players to jump on the next existential threat.

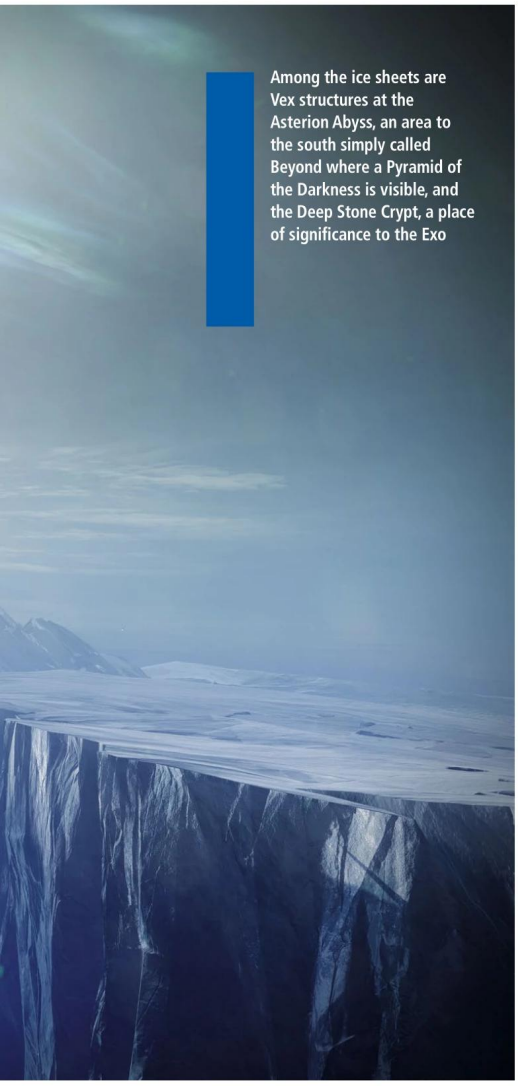
But story won't be everything. Once narrative potential is proven, the process of looking at the technical limitations and requirements of vaulting or unvaulting content begins. "Then we validate and challenge our assumptions with analytics data of real-world usage: 'How much is Crown of Sorrow played each week and by whom?'" Smith says.

Bungie comprehensively announced the Destiny Content Vault in June to a predictably varied response. For one thing, it meant that the clock was suddenly ticking for many players to experience a swathe of activities they'd overlooked and to claim their rewards. Quests left languishing in the Pursuits tab for months have suddenly become vital, no matter how onerous the task of completing them. And it's never good to be told that a set of stuff you bought is being taken away from you. But few players could claim that even, say, Menagerie, the cooperative horde challenge introduced in summer 2019's Season of Opulence, has the same appeal it had at launch. Its rewards – its guns and armour – are stale and it takes little place in endgame progression systems.

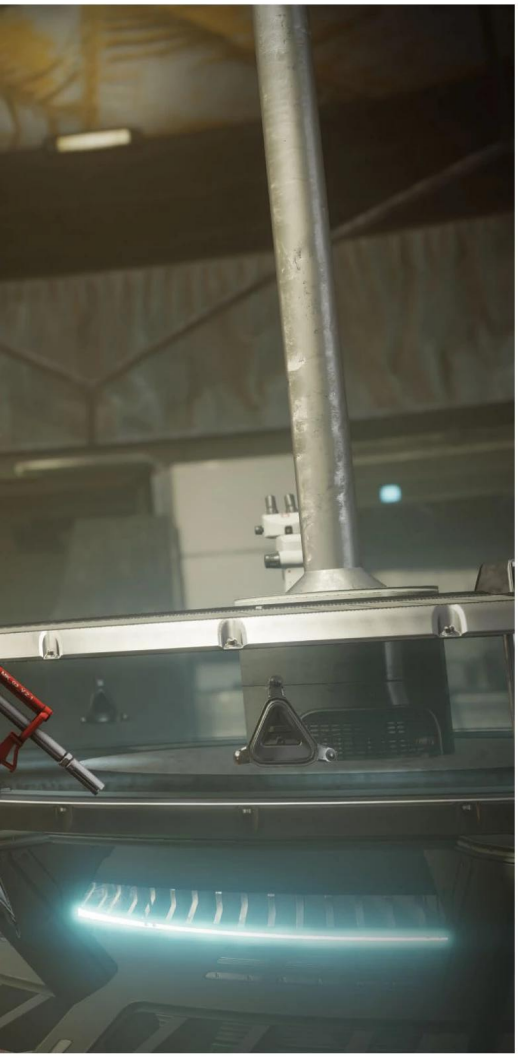
"[The announcement] went about how we expected it to," says Noseworthy, who is adamant that the Vault is not some attempt to instil FOMO. "I think the reason was that we spoke to a lot of players." On top of its usual consumer research, Bungie directly talked with "30 or 40 players from the community" to gauge their response. "The message resonated with them," Noseworthy says. "They understood, and many of them said to us, 'Hey, if you just come out and tell the ▶

FREE LOADING

With the release of Shadowkeep in September 2019 came New Light, which made a large portion of *Destiny 2* free-to-play. "The success metric was to have new people come into *Destiny* and for some to find a game that they can make into their hobby," Smith says. "A ton of players have done that, which is awesome." But he knows that newcomers tend to find *Destiny* overwhelming, so changes are afoot to give New Light players a better introduction to what the likes of Crucible, Last Sectors and Strikes are. But, Noseworthy reminds us, "*Destiny*'s complexity and the scope, and the fact that everything isn't just presented to you on a silver platter, it's kind of a feature, not a bug. It gives you reasons to talk to your friends and for content creators to make videos. That depth is actually valuable." With *Beyond Light*, the free-roam areas, Strikes, PvP and Gambit will remain free to play, while paying players get the raids, Exotics quests and new storylines. So while New Light is losing content to the Vault, there's still lots to do. "I think we're closer now to having *Destiny*'s intro experience flash the potential of the game you can fall in love with," Smith says.



Among the ice sheets are Vex structures at the Asterion Abyss, an area to the south simply called Beyond where a Pyramid of the Darkness is visible, and the Deep Stone Crypt, a place of significance to the Exo



community, everyone's gonna understand. Some folks might not be happy to like it; they want to hold on to The Red War campaign forever; but they'll understand.'

"But you know," Noseworthy adds, "It kind of doesn't matter how people feel about it right now. What matters is how the game feels in November. You know, the ecosystem of content and experience. Is there enough for people to do? Do they feel engaged and want to play *Destiny* with their friends?"

Right now, he and Smith aren't absolutely sure of the answer. *Destiny* is an unknowable beast, even to its creators. They do not know how, exactly, a feature will play out amid its other competing, intersecting systems, whether it's a pursuit which, 30 hours of playtime later, feels less rewarding than the effort of playing it, or the Exotic weapon with the unforeseen quirk that starts overwhelming Gambit and becomes the only viable way to play. These things are difficult to test for. "Every time we make an expansion set, every time, there are people who play, love it and keep going, and there are people who play and churn out and they're like, 'F this'," says Smith. "I don't know that we'll be able to earnestly answer that question until this fall."

At the root of the Content Vault is the idea that *Destiny* has to change. The internal push to satisfy Bungie's creative ambitions and manage its technical and logistical realities are strong reasons. But there are also external ones, namely the complexity of its player base and the shifting context in which the game sits. For all that *Destiny*'s unique voice and style helps it stand distinct from other shooters, it's the venue for a very wide range of playstyles and interests. It hosts sternly competitive play and challenging cooperative play. It's a stage for almost absurdly detailed, but fragmentary, grand space-opera lore that's ripe for feverish interpretation. It's a place to relax and to socialise, a place for intricate theory-crafting and brain-melting puzzle-solving. It's a grind-lover's paradise that's also happy to serve immediate FPS fun. Every change Bungie makes impacts each of these interests differently.

"I don't know that we'll ever really feel like we have the balance totally right, because of the diversity of our player base," says Smith. "You know, we don't have a canonical *Destiny* player. I mean, we have data that *speculates* what they're like, but even that data says that these players are unlike any of a game we've ever seen."

To work on a game like this, he says, is to feel that every decision you make is to tip the scales from one group of players to another, and to watch one group lauding a new feature while another simultaneously castigates it. During *Destiny*'s third year, which is now just ending, Bungie's aim was to deliver many smaller but regular drops of new content, instead of focusing it in fewer large drops. "I could hear someone saying, 'Hey, this year felt really good.' And I could open up a tab and bump into 55 people talking about how this year stank,'" says Smith. Planning for *Destiny*'s future is about taking in this spectrum of sentiments and smashing them together with Bungie's reams of player data, before sticking a finger in the air to gauge the ways games around *Destiny* are evolving.

"You're like, 'oh shit, this is where things might be heading. We've got to keep up with this'. But the truth of working on *Destiny* is that there's always something changing your plans," says Smith. "It's the embodiment of best-laid plans, right? A lot of times it doesn't matter what we believe what our strategy was, because it's about the team executing to the highest level that they can with the time we have."

"THE TRUTH OF WORKING ON DESTINY IS THAT THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING CHANGING YOUR PLANS"

Ask Noseworthy and Smith about how they plan adding new guns and abilities to the game and they'll deny that they have the luxury to have one. "Like how we build Exotics, right? Holy cow, players love these things; we could have hundreds of designers just working on them and we still couldn't make them fast enough to keep up with demand." He points towards Witherhoard, one of the emblematic Exotics from Season 11. This single-shot kinetic-type grenade launcher leaves behind a long-lasting circle of area damage on explosion which is great for applying to bottlenecks and it was given to all buyers of the season pass at the season's beginning and to all players once they'd reached rank 35. "Look, it wasn't part of the strategy, it was just the team who came up with something rad."

It may sound messy, but don't forget that Noseworthy and Smith have now been working on the series for over 10 years. They talk about it existing in this chaotic state, but they've steered and managed it nonetheless, through good ▶

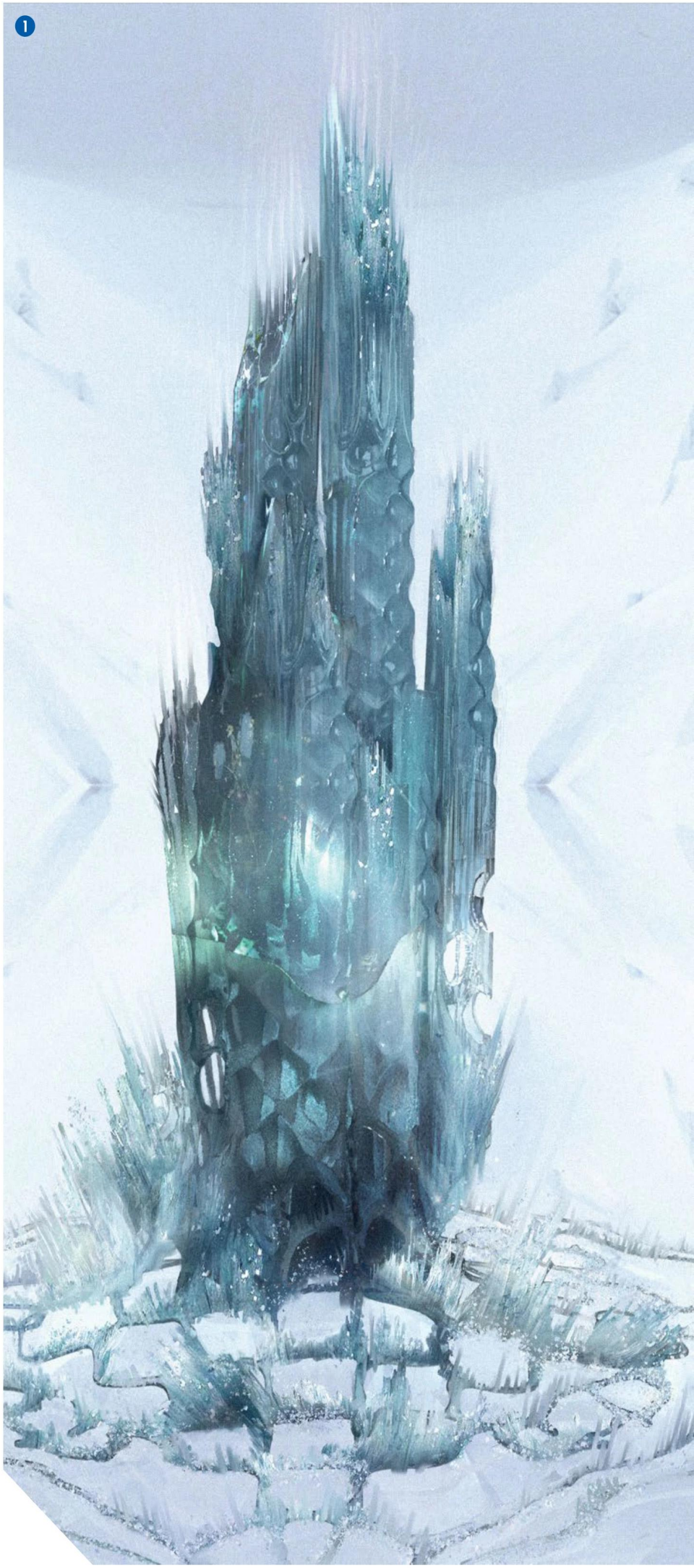
times and bad. Noseworthy celebrates constraints, remembering how The Taken King was a product of a failure to build on the game's core technology in time for it. "We got a small allotment of engineers and quite a few artists and designers and said, 'Okay, we're not going to get many features here. What's the best thing we can make?' And we set off and made, I think, an excellent expansion pack." Home to the secret-filled free-roam area The Dreadnaught and introducing the Void subclasses, it *was* an excellent expansion.

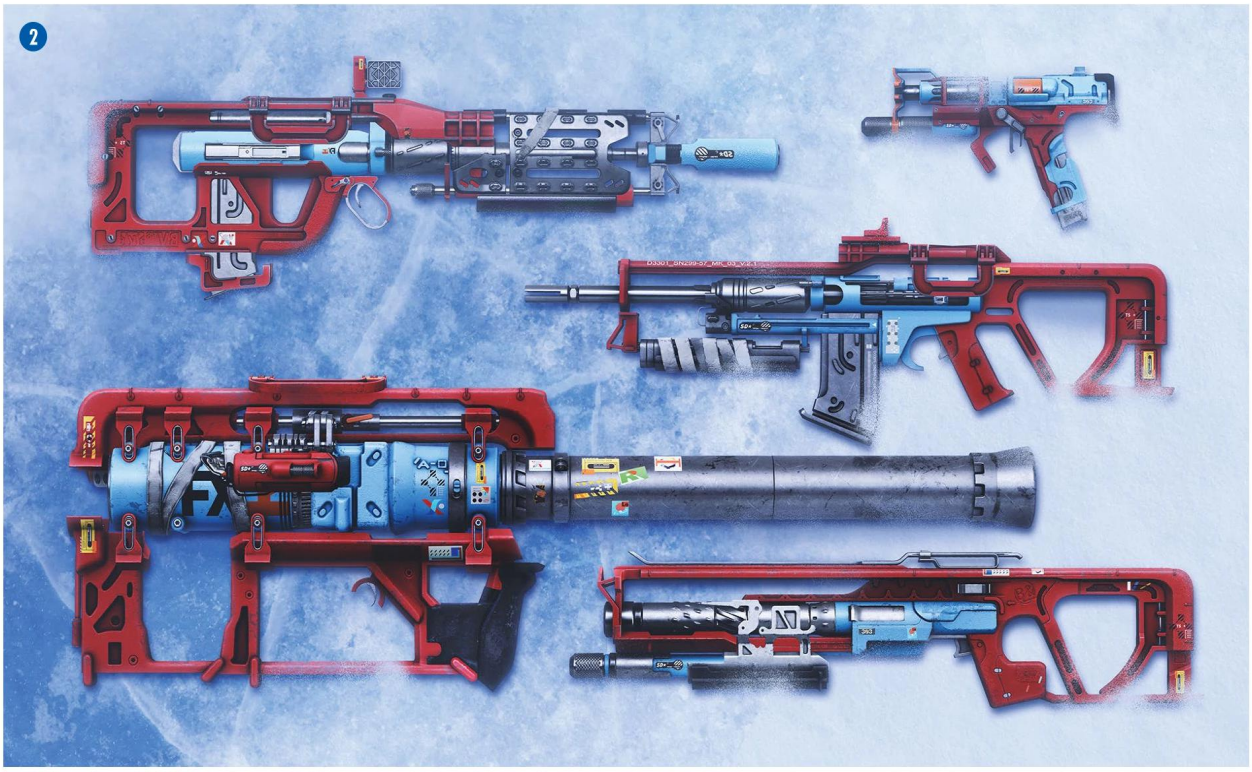
"Many games lose tons of development time to tools that change and break over time," Noseworthy notes. The subtext to this, of course, is the fear that the second half of *Destiny 2*'s life is going to be resting on increasingly old tools and technology, but he says that his team is finding a balance between working with what they've got and building new things – he calls out recent advances in deploying patches more seamlessly.

Moreover, Noseworthy and Smith say that Bungie's independence from Activision has gained the studio more insight into its players. "Now that we can understand the full scope of the business, it's empowered us to make decisions where we can put players first, like removing loot boxes from the game, or delaying *Beyond Light* by two months to improve its quality."

There's certainly evidence of a greater focus on players in the way this oil tanker of a game has been steadily been turning towards putting greater flexibility in their hands. It started a year ago in the Shadowkeep expansion, with the ability stats you can accrue by equipping armour and the bonus effects you can gain by setting mods in it. *Destiny*'s library of mods is now huge – there are over 300 of them – and they've come to form the backbone to *Destiny*'s daily and weekly loop: you'll collect precious Enhancement Cores and Prisms through completing bounties, and then use them to upgrade armour so each piece has enough energy to pay for the mods you want to equip. Mods encourage fresh ways to fight and open up new opportunities to use abilities that might have fallen by the wayside, and it's become more or less mandatory to set up specific character builds to take on *Destiny 2*'s most challenging pursuits, such as Nightfall: The Ordeal and Master difficulty Nightmare Hunts.

Mods have been so successful, in fact, that *Beyond Light* will further build on them. Loot found in its new raid will debut a range of new mods that will define new builds. It will also extend mods to your ghost, the floating bot once voiced by Peter Dinklage. Ghost mods will give you greater granular choice over similar perks that they offer today, granting XP bonuses for completing specific pursuits, raising drop rates for Enhancement ▶





1 For a moon that's home to actual water, it's fitting that ice forms the basis for Europa's materials and objects of interest. 2 *Beyond Light*'s weapons are supposed to be relics of Europa's old human colonies, so they sport a practical look redolent of militarised climbing gear. 3 It's hard to know whether Guardians truly need the insulation, since their gear seems to support the absolute cold of the Void, but *Beyond Light* armour looks suitably warm

Cores, providing bonus Glimmer, showing nearby chests on your tracker. Three slots will be open from the off, with a fourth that's unlocked when you Masterwork it by maxing out its energy level.

***Beyond Light* will** even allow you to fiddle around with the specifics of your character's Stasis power. You'll be able to slot Aspects – presented as named items you'll find in the world, such as a robotic Fallen arm – which grant extra effects on using your class' abilities. Warlocks, for example, will have an Aspect called Frostpulse that freezes nearby enemies when they use their Rift. Aspects will in turn have slots for Fragments, items similar to mods which trigger further effects, so you could put a Whisper of Bonds Fragment into Frostpulse which grants Super energy when you shoot and defeat frozen enemies, setting up a virtuous circle in which you ice enemies and then gain energy from them. Hunters get Shatterdrive, an Aspect which adds the ability while airborne to plunge to the ground and shatter nearby enemies, and Whisper of Hedrons, a Fragment that grants bonus weapon damage after freezing a target. But this one comes with a cost – equipping it also reduces your armour's Strength stat by 10 points.

"What we're trying to do with Stasis and wielding the Darkness is to show you as a player more freedom," says Smith. "There's also a meta statement that we're making about the difference in the powers between light and dark, but there's this other part, which is the fantasy of, 'This is my guardian, there are many like it, but this one is mine.'" He admits that *Destiny 2*'s early days were a little too restrictive. "I think we're trying to get a little bit back to the feeling of *Destiny 1*, but updated to how we're thinking and some of the systems that we're using today.

"I'll use a MOBA as an example," Smith continues. "They get to have a lot of tuning vectors for their four abilities. The modularity and the piecemeal nature of Stasis allows us more flexibility to do more to introduce –" He almost reveals more but catches himself. "There's cool stuff. I know that Kevin [Yanes] and the abilities team have a pretty strong desire to keep iterating on it. We're just getting started."

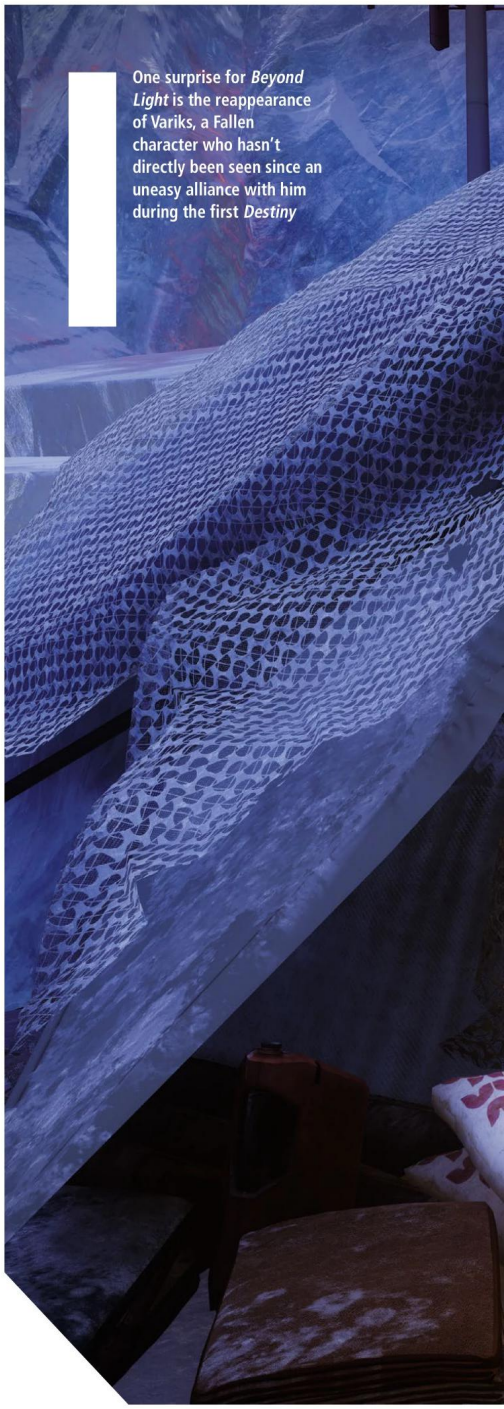
Beyond Light and *Destiny 2*'s next two years of expansions to come – 2021's The Witch Queen and 2022's Nightfall – are being built on a foundation which is exciting for *Destiny*'s players. Change is difficult for any live game, but it can make it feel more vital. Look at the way *Fortnite* happily replaces entire islands in the course of a day and holding strictly limited-time, must-attend events – perhaps at the cost of a measure of unfair FOMO. The Vault is a gentler, perhaps more player-friendly and definitely more narrative-friendly way to achieve the same efficiency of development – if Bungie can pull off the gamble.

At the same time, the next three years of *Destiny 2* aren't *Destiny 3*. *Destiny 2* will launch on PS5 and Xbox Series X and S, and thus become nominally next-gen. They will allow it to support 60fps at 4K on consoles for the first time, which any PC *Destiny* player will tell you is transformative, and they'll presumably benefit from the next-generation's improved load times. But it'll still be 2017's *Destiny 2*, with the same broad restrictions over the size of its levels, the number of players you'll encounter at a time, and only incrementally evolved to suit the shifting interests of its players and the shifting nature of the realities of its production. And Noseworthy seems comfortable with that. *Destiny* has always been a little bigger than the reality waiting on your hard drive; its promise has always been a little grander than it has ever lived up to. It's never really had the kind of sharp focus of, say, *Call Of Duty* or *Fortnite*. But that's because *Destiny*'s promise is so encompassing, and the space into which it could expand so large. "Our vision for *Destiny* is to be, you know, an amazing action-MMO single evolving world that you can play anytime, anywhere, with your friends," Noseworthy says.

And so, in many ways, *Destiny* resists the next generation: PS5 and Xbox Series consoles simply offer another place for *Destiny* to be, alongside playing on phones via Google's Stadia and Microsoft's XCloud, and the previous generation, so it can reach as many players as possible. "Higher framerates and faster load times and higher resolution, we're excited about that, but we don't think of next-gen uniquely, like we're going to just make *Destiny 2* for these platforms. We kind of see *Destiny* as the platform."

"I'm excited to have new hardware to play with because I'm a dork," Smith adds. "But, you know, one of the things I love about working on *Destiny* is that we're working on something that's agnostic of generation, and console and affiliation. Like, we're just *Destiny*." ■

"I THINK WE'RE TRYING TO GET A LITTLE BIT BACK TO THE FEELING OF DESTINY 1, BUT UPDATED"



One surprise for *Beyond Light* is the reappearance of Variks, a Fallen character who hasn't directly been seen since an uneasy alliance with him during the first *Destiny*

The Warlock uses Stasis powers through a momentarily visible staff, which fires freezing projectiles, and Penumbral Blast, a melee attack which solidifies whatever it touches. Players can finish these enemies off, or just bypass them

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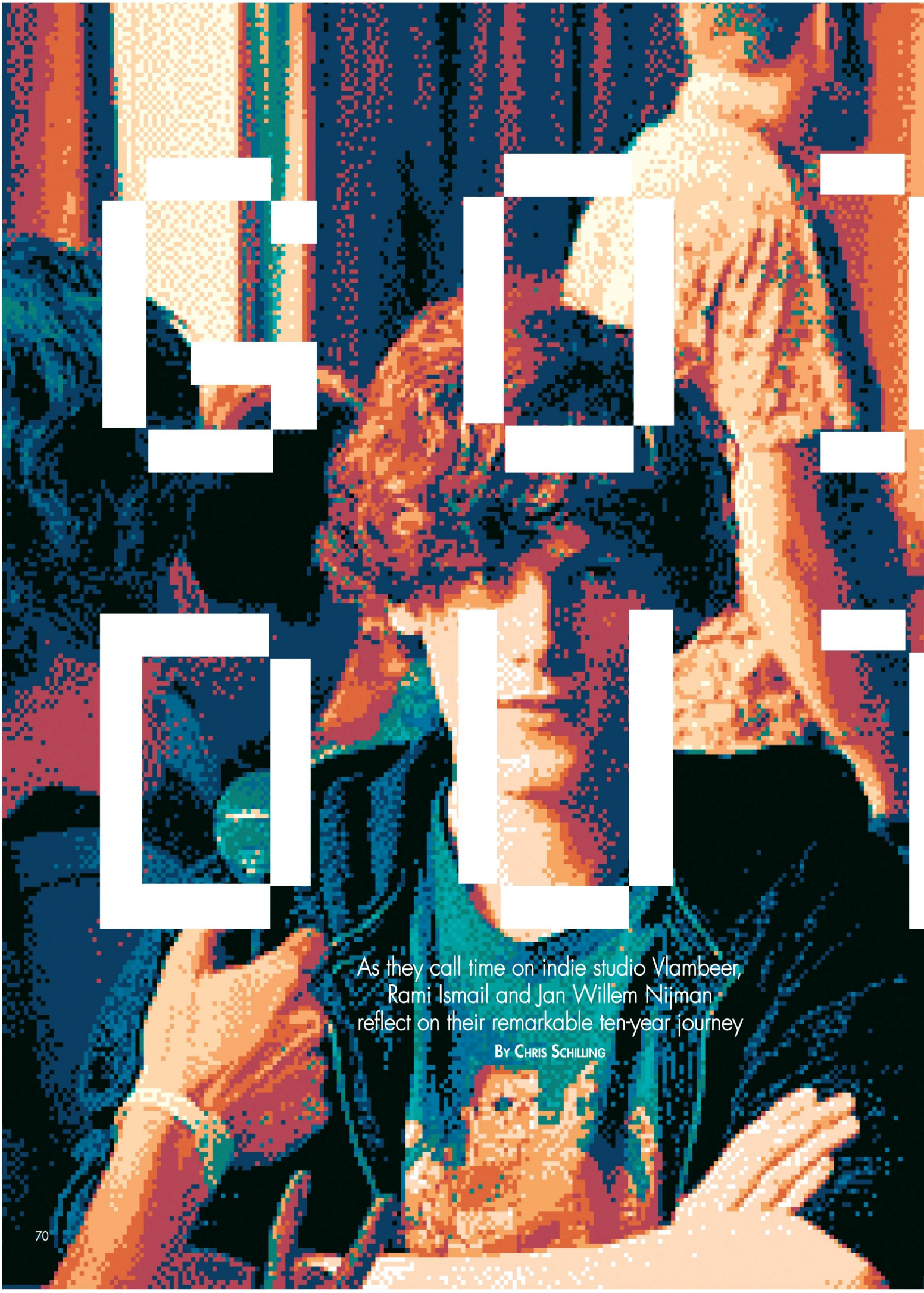


As they call time on indie studio Vlambeer, Rami Ismail and Jan Willem Nijman reflect on their remarkable ten-year journey

By Chris Schilling

On September 1st 2020, Vlambeer celebrated its tenth anniversary by announcing its closure. It was, **Rami Ismail** points out, a quintessentially Vlambeer way to mark the milestone. "It's very loud. It's overly dramatic. It's a little obnoxious, maybe? To say, 'We're ten years old! Also, we quit.'" Yet it's a happy ending, too. Ismail and **Jan Willem Nijman**, Vlambeer's two mismatched halves who have consistently managed to make their differences work to their advantage, are ready to move on. "Vlambeer was born of necessity," Ismail continues. "And I think the end result is that JW and I grew enough that for us, it's no longer needed. And it's no longer needed for the industry around it. It did its job, you know? Let it sleep."

Nijman and Ismail never had a ten-year plan. Not even close. In fact, when they decided to work together, both hoped that one or two games would make them enough money to go their separate ways. It was, as they cheerfully admit, a somewhat uneasy alliance right from the start. "Rami and I had this weird dynamic going on where we didn't really like each other," Nijman says, recalling his first memory of Ismail when the two were on a train to their game design course at the Utrecht School Of The Arts. "He was talking about working on this great indie game and it was 3D and it cost money. I was this 17-year-old who made freeware games and was super against triple-A. I heard him talking about this fancy game and I told him, 'Dude, can you shut up? That's not indie at all.'" But over the following two years, the two developed a grudging respect for one another. Ismail was ambitious, capable of managing teams, and getting projects off the ground. Nijman was the ideas man, churning out hundreds of tiny games, occasionally producing something with real promise.

Ismail recalls one particular example that impressed him, around a year before the two left school. "He convinced me to play a prototype of his called *If You Really Want It, You Can Fly*. It looked like all of his prototypes – very simple, clearly made in a day at best," he says. ("I made it during a lunch break," Nijman interrupts.) The game featured a small character standing atop a building. Pressing the spacebar would, in theory, make him fly. But each time Ismail pressed it, the man would fall and die, letting out a terrifying scream and leaving a huge impact crater. Ismail tried once more, this time holding the spacebar, and watched as the man flew into space and suffocated, again with a horrific sound effect to accompany his death. "JW was like, 'No, no. You have to *really* want it,' I'm like, 'What the hell is this kid talking about?' and so I just stared at this character and said, 'Fly already, damn it!' And then as soon as I thought that, he started flying! I had no idea what had just happened."

Stunned, Ismail looked for some kind of secret trick. Had Nijman pressed a button somewhere, or used a wireless mouse to trigger the flight? The solution was much simpler. There was a hidden timer in the game: if there was no input for long enough, the character would automatically fly. "I got really frustrated that he had read me so well," Ismail says. "After I got up, I mashed the spacebar in frustration, and as soon as I did, the character stopped flying and fell to his death anyway. JW had perfectly predicted the frustration arc that people would go through. It was unpolished enough that it needed JW standing behind you to explain what it is, and how it works. But that day I learned that JW is really good at game design, and has a knack of making things feel nice in a span of hours, whereas I was the kind of person who worked on game ideas for a year and a half."

Nijman joined a team Ismail had assembled for a game project developed outside school hours. "It was incredibly ambitious," Nijman says. It was basically a full-blown 3D space sim, that we were going to make with ten inexperienced students in six months." At the time, just about every indie developer wanted to get its game onto Xbox Live Arcade, where smaller games were thriving. Ismail had managed to enter into negotiations with Microsoft about getting the game on the platform. "We had a nice visual style, a good musical identity, and the basic framework of movement in a videogame with some shooting," he says. "But in gameplay terms, it was less than most of JW's three-hour prototypes." But before the team was in a position to land a deal with Microsoft, the school stepped in and prevented Ismail from negotiating further, claiming to own the rights to the game.

Being denied their moonshot was sufficient encouragement for the two to quit the course, having realised their different skillsets complemented one another perfectly. "JW had this community that challenged each other to make stuff quickly," Ismail says. "And the main skill he got there is that he tried a lot of game ideas which inherently made him a better designer, and in trying to stand out meant he had to find really effective ways of making the game feel better. I think that trademark Vlambeer feel definitely comes from there. That's JW." Ismail, on the other hand, had a knack of taking nascent ideas and making them accessible, turning them into potential commercial products.

He could also help tidy up Nijman's code. "If I had to describe JW's coding style, this would not be a very polite article," Ismail begins, before immediately abandoning any pretence of politeness. "There's something to be said for just writing shit that works. With a big emphasis on the word 'shit'. Because JW's code was… I think it genuinely made grown programmers cry, like, two or three times in our career." Nijman immediately shoots back: "That says more about programmers than my code." Ismail frowns. "I think it's a little bit of both. We can be a little stuck up, but some of the code was genuinely rubbish. One of my favourite anecdotes will forever be the time I was trying to port some of JW's code, and there was a comment that said 'Advanced math ahead', and it was a sine wave which is probably one of the most basic mathematical properties in the world." Warming to his theme, Ismail continues: "There was another time where the basic camera code was this seven-line monstrosity with every type of trigonometry in the world in there, just smashed together until it worked. It took me a day to turn it into an approximation of what he had written." Nijman laughs. "Especially in the early days, we were a bit… well, you could compare it to a food truck where the food is really good, but you definitely don't want to see the kitchen." Quick as a flash, Ismail responds. "So in that case, I was the Food Inspection?"

The two continue their good-natured bickering as we ask about the game that transformed their fortunes. Whether or not *Crates From Hell* – later to be renamed *Super Crate Box* – had its single-crate spawns from the start is still a matter for debate between the two. The more important thing, Ismail eventually notes, ▶

TRIUMPH AND DISASTER

One side effect of the moral victory – and instant success – of *Ridiculous Fishing* is that people to this day still ask Ismail whether he was thankful for Gamenauts' clone and the whirlwind it wrought. "Absolutely not!" he scoffs. "Sure, we managed to turn it around. But it was one of the worst development experiences of my life. It took seven days of being stuck in a car together with the team to get that spark of excitement back." And just as Nijman expresses thanks for the road trip that pushed everybody to restart development, he remembers both he and Ismail were concerned that people would believe Vlambeer's game was the clone. "That terrified us to the point where we wondered if we should just make something else." Happily, the studio stuck to its guns and reaped the rewards for its courage.

Justin Chan artwork of the first five *Nuclear Throne* characters. Chan was hired after producing a piece of fan art for the 2013 game jam edition

"RAMI AND I HAD THIS WEIRD DYNAMIC GOING ON WHERE WE DIDN'T REALLY LIKE EACH OTHER"

is that Nijman's original concept was desperately close to realising its potential, but wasn't *quite* there. Ismail realised it was his job to convince his new business partner that, of all his game ideas, this was the one that would establish Vlambeer as a force to be reckoned with. "It felt special," he says. "Most action games are about finding the right [weapon] and then using that until your ammo runs out. And JW took that away and collapsed it into a really elegant system."

Having assembled a team with trusted friends from school and Nijman's indie contacts, the newly-formed Vlambeer realised it needed money, and Nijman quickly prototyped a new idea: a fishing game with guns. At that point, it became clear that the pair's 'getaway plan' was bearing more fruit than either imagined it ever would. Ismail ported Nijman's Game Maker prototype and sold it to a Flash website as *Radical Fishing*, earning the studio enough money to pay for development of *Crates From Hell*. "That collaboration kicked in between JW coming up with a very clever, elegant design and then me helping to polish the user flow, and bringing it to a platform," Ismail says. "We hashed out where the problems were, and then we sold it. And that loop just continued, despite our intentions to make enough money to survive and then find our own path in life. Instead we kept it up for ten years."

Even at this early stage, the two were thinking about the studio's identity. It was, Ismail says, a necessity partly because they disagreed on so many things – although they were always able to come to an accord on the big decisions. Its logo, meanwhile, came about from "a napkin drawing of a bear on fire". But if that was Vlambeer, it needed a name for the projects it made purely for money, or any experimental fare that didn't belong under the same banner – hence *Radical Fishing* crediting its creators as 'Not Vlambeer'. "We quickly got better at making games and being commercial just by having done it once or twice," Ismail says. "So we retired that brand really quickly. The idea was: here's where we make random nonsense, and it might be a little broken. Whereas Vlambeer is where we released videogames which are also a little broken, but a more *controlled* kind of broken."

You'd be hard pushed to describe the newly-retitled *Super Crate Box* as broken. Together with artists Roy Nathan de Groot and Paul Veer, and composer Eirik Suhrke (latterly responsible for *Spelunky 2*'s dynamic score), Ismail and Nijman delivered a brilliant debut game. A taut and refined single-screen action-platformer – think the original *Mario Bros.* with guns, played at five times the speed – it was an instant calling card for Vlambeer, even before the ports to iOS and Vita that cemented its reputation as a modern arcade classic.

Little wonder, then, that Devolver Digital – itself a relative newcomer to the industry – came calling, convincing Vlambeer to develop a *Serious Sam* spin-off. Initially, Nijman says, the pair were reluctant, despite being fans of the series. "We were very aware of not wanting to sell out," he says. "We needed to keep our indie cred and make great games, and then on the side if we had to make decisions purely for commercial reasons, we'd keep that separate. And this was like, 'Eurgh, a publisher.'" Ismail chips in: "We thought they were suits, effectively." The two didn't take Devolver's offer seriously, and Nijman decided to send in a jokey pitch "to see if they didn't just want a *Super Crate Box* reskin with *Serious Sam* characters to make some quick money, because that's what we thought they wanted". He shows us a pencil sketch he drew of a JRPG-style battle, with stick-figure characters on the right of the screen running backwards and shooting towards a horde of generic enemies approaching from the left. This, he says, was the pitch in its entirety. They sent it over, not expecting the response they soon received. "We got an email back, saying: 'That looks great, let's do it,'" Nijman laughs.

It was a smart move on Devolver's part, proving that the fledgling publisher was prepared to give Vlambeer creative freedom. This settled the studio's unease – and helped it gain a foothold among indie devs, since Ismail and Nijman could vouch for it. And though few would make a case for *The Random Encounter* being the studio's finest hour, its success proved to Devolver there was a commercial market for indie games. For Vlambeer, meanwhile, getting a game on Steam meant it could keep funds ticking over while it worked on other projects. There was no longer a need for the Not Vlambeer label. If the studio's plan was to make 'better games, not bigger games', it now found itself able to do both. By then, Nijman and Ismail had found their specialities and quickly separated their responsibilities. "I stopped bothering with business stuff, and Rami trusted me more with game design," Nijman says. "We got to a point where whenever we disagreed about something, it was clear who made the final call. And so we became a well-oiled machine."

But with the studio's profile on the rise, suddenly disaster struck, and the machine ground to a halt. Its next project had begun under much happier circumstances. Via a mutual friend, Ismail and Nijman had been introduced to designer Zach Gage, who had just released *Lose/Lose*, a version of *Space Invaders* that deleted files from your computer. Then artist Greg Wohlwend – one half of fellow development duo Mikeandgreg, developer of *Solipskier* – became involved, and the four decided to develop an iOS version of *Radical Fishing*, to be retitled as *Ridiculous Fishing*. "iPhones were relatively new, and *Canabalt* had proved that you could do mobile games, but beyond that indies on mobile wasn't a given," Ismail recalls. "So we wanted to do that because it was cool and it felt kind of prestigious and above our weight" – a running theme among Vlambeer's output. With Suhrke back on board, Wolhwend's distinctive angular art style and Gage refining the user experience to eye-opening effect ("It was a huge lesson for us," Ismail admits) it seemed nothing could go wrong.

Until, that is, a year into development, when Gamenauts released the brazen clone *Ninja Fishing*. Ismail, otherwise effusive throughout our interview, lets out a deep sigh. "That will remain, for a long time, one of the weirdest days of my life." It was, he notes, the first bad thing that had happened to Vlambeer in two years of operation, and it came at a point when he and Nijman were still riding the wave of the studio's early momentum – having perhaps failed to realise they had been overworking themselves. "Both of us just kind of shut down," Ismail recalls. "I pulled myself back into work mode with a headache unlike anything I've ever felt before and just started writing emails to the cloner, and to anybody that could help us to figure out what our options were." A lawyer told them there was nothing they could do; that game mechanics couldn't be copyrighted. And Ismail realised he didn't

FUTURE SIGHT

Ismail and Nijman say they're excitedly looking forward to the next generation of indie games from a new perspective, as both admit the conditions that spawned Vlambeer no longer exist. "I realised that if you released Super Crate Box today for free, people wouldn't notice it," Nijman says. "What you need to get an indie game off the ground now, it's so hard." Ismail acknowledges that it's an inevitability of an industry that continues to move at an astonishing pace. "I've talked to people that have been here since the late '70s. And they say this is what it's been like all along. By the time you're used to Thing A, Thing C is starting up and Thing B happened during development. That's part of what is exciting about games, but it also emphasises the responsibility of the people that are visible. Because it's really easy for people coming up in the industry to go like, 'Well, that was successful. Let's do that.'" Nijman laughs. "Yeah, you have to say 'No, no, that was a year ago. You can't do that anymore.'"

want Vlambeer to sue anyway. "The idea of owning gameplay ideas sounded terrifying, because then Nintendo or Microsoft or PlayStation or whoever could do it, too." He and Nijman, both of whom prided themselves on their principles and moral values, had seen the cynical, business-focused side of the industry, and it left them demoralised and deeply upset.

With production halted and the team struggling for motivation, Vlambeer came perilously close to going out of business. It probably would have, in fact, but for the grace of now-defunct Canadian developer Halfbot, which generously offered to port *Super Crate Box* to iOS. That provided Vlambeer with the resources to keep going, though it took a road trip across the US with Ismail, Gage, Wohlwend and Michael Boxleiter (the other half of Mikengreg) for the team to properly get its mojo back. "We called it A Week Of Hatred, because at the end of that trip we were either going to hate each other or this game was going to get done," Ismail says. "And somewhere during that trip, we found enough energy to sit down and give the project another push."

In the meantime, Vlambeer had kicked up enough of a stink that the cloning story generated a storm of sympathetic coverage. "JW and I had a conversation where we were either going to shut down the studio and just give up, or make a major shit-show out of this, make our statement and stand up for creativity and for original games," Ismail adds. But it needed more than its relatively small Twitter following to make its outrage heard. "We thought if we were going to go out this way, then we were at least going to go out making some noise." A New York Times profile and widespread newspaper coverage elsewhere taught the pair that it was worth trying to punch above their weight. A memorable GDC talk followed.

Though the pair say they wouldn't want to go through it again, it proved a productive break from development, all told. As Gage and Wohlwend started working on side projects – the latter providing the art for puzzle classic *Threes* – Ismail and Nijman channeled their anger into the blistering sepia-toned dogfights of *Luftrausers*. "When we started development [of *Ridiculous Fishing*], we were a bunch of indies that nobody had heard of," Ismail says. "By the time we were wrapping up, all of us had our own career. The game was finished by a team of… it's a very embarrassing term, but everybody called us indie rock stars." (**Edge**, for its part, went with 'indie supergroup'.) "Either way, we were certainly known entities." Then the game came out, and Vlambeer's triumphant comeback was complete. True to its subtitle, *Ridiculous Fishing* really was A Tale Of Redemption. Universal acclaim and an Apple Design Award followed, as the platform holder crowned it iPhone Game of the Year.

"Even from the press side, it felt like everybody was cheering for us. Like, 'You made it!'" Nijman beams. Ismail, meanwhile, says the response reinforced his belief that Vlambeer was making games for all the right reasons – and that the industry could still support distinctive, original work. "For a moment, we got worried that the creativity and hard work of making interesting games was not the way to be. That the way to be was to rip off whatever you saw and then you make a million dollars. Because that's exactly what [bracket] I put the clone in. And it felt like the industry collectively said, 'No, you're right. That is what games should be'. At least, that's definitely how we heard it."

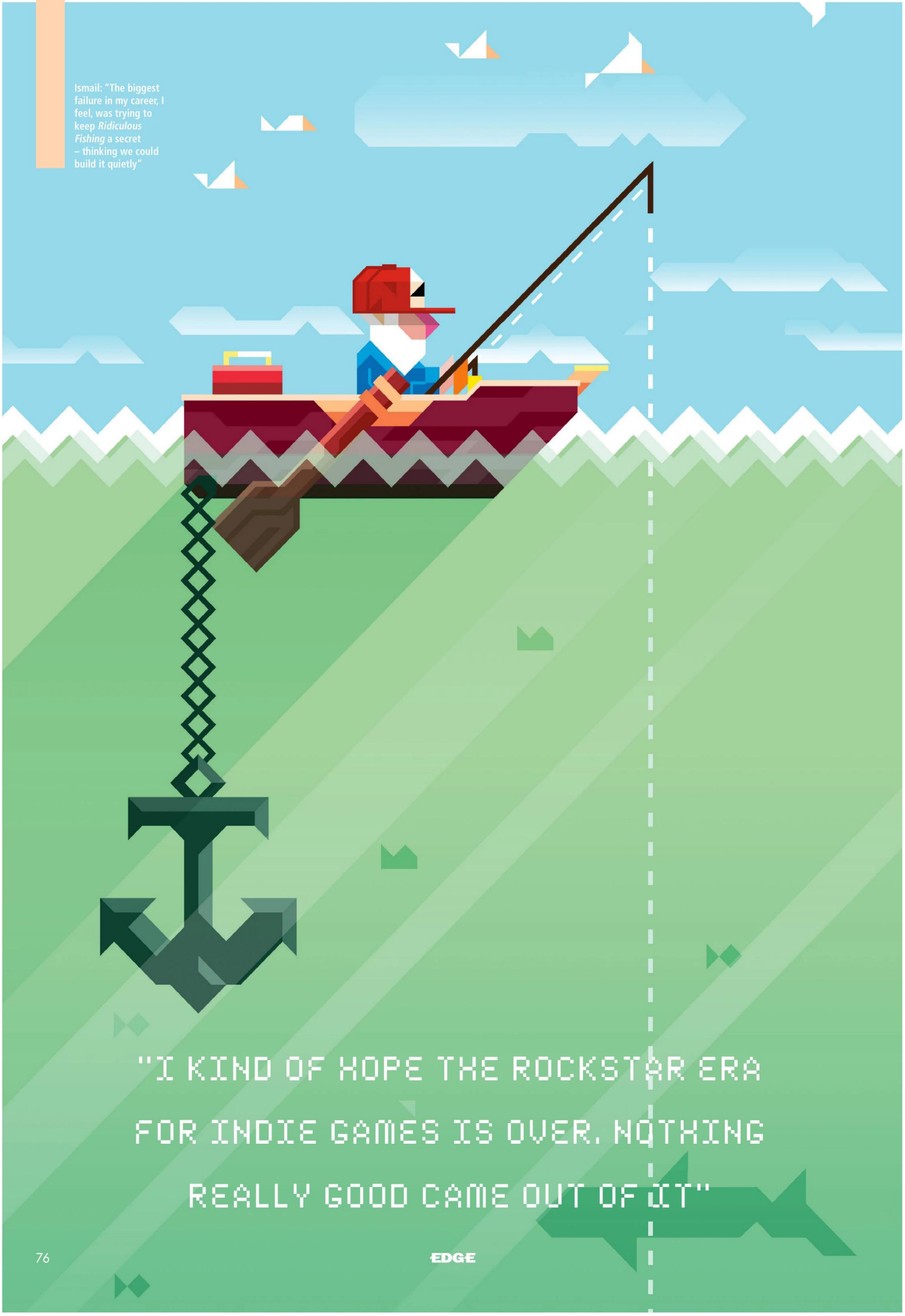
It was a no-brainer for Vlambeer to partner once more with Devolver for *Luftrausers*' release the following year. Devolver had published its breakout hit in *Hotline Miami* in the interim, yet success hadn't changed the natural camaraderie both parties shared, Nijman says, "because we'd also been nobodies together". The publisher's assistance, Ismail admits, was particularly important, since both he and Nijman had agreed they needed to work smarter. Exhausted by the cloning episode, they didn't want to relapse into bad habits. "Those first two years where we worked so hard, we were at the age where you can get away with it," Nijman begins. "I mean, you can eat trash every day…" Ismail butts in: "And we did, oh boy! But we pushed ourselves to the limit." Now, Nijman says, it was time to grow up, to be more responsible. "What he's saying is that after *Ridiculous Fishing*, we were suddenly really tired," Ismail laughs. "That was the new thing."

Even so, there was little evidence that Vlambeer was slowing down much. Just as *Ridiculous Fishing* was completing its long development journey, the studio started developing a new game – and this time, it took a very different approach to development. It began when *Minecraft* developer Mojang asked Vlambeer to be part of a three-day charity game jam. Nijman had been trying to build a prototype for an ambitious action Roguelike for some time, which proved the perfect candidate for the event. "Vlambeer had this weird cadence of: make prototype, prototype gets good reception, make game," Ismail says. "Any game we made had to be fun within a day, otherwise we didn't trust ourselves to finish it," Nijman adds. The jam went so well that the studio was keen to do it again, reckoning that preparing a game in the open for Early Access would be one way to make sure it didn't get cloned. "We're documenting this!" Nijman says, triumphantly. "Yeah, we have the receipts this time!" Ismail replies, and both break into laughter.

A top-down shooter conducted at breakneck speed, with permadeath raising the stakes of its intense skirmishes, *Nuclear Throne* (formerly *Wasteland Kings*) launched in Early Access in October 2013. Vlambeer committed to a similarly fast-paced schedule of two livestreams and an update every week. "It was very fun," Ismail says, before the deadpan follow-up: "For the first, like, 20 weeks." Nijman concurs: "I have very fond memories in the same way that you do of being on a tropical beach, where you forget about all the mosquitoes and that you had diarrhoea and sunburn. In the end, you only remember the tropical beach. So it was tough, but I also have good memories of working with the team."

The game was a hit from day one, quickly attracting a fan following for its combination of characterful mutant heroes, its kinetic action and screen-shaking explosions – and those rapid-fire updates. Suddenly, Vlambeer needed a community manager; despite having vowed to take his foot off the gas, Ismail found himself assuming that role. Mistakes, he admits, were made – particularly during the middle stages of development, when it became too easy to simply add new ingredients rather than refine what was already there. "When you're tired and you're working on a game with weekly updates, it's very easy to just get away with, 'Okay, we added eight more guns,' instead of doing the actual difficult work, like a settings menu or stuff like that," Nijman says. "You can kind of see the weeks where we had a bit ▶

Ismail: "The biggest failure in my career, I feel, was trying to keep *Ridiculous Fishing* a secret – thinking we could build it quietly"



"I KIND OF HOPE THE ROCKSTAR ERA FOR INDIE GAMES IS OVER. NOTHING REALLY GOOD CAME OUT OF IT"

FISHING LESSONS

Beyond the cloning catastrophe, *Ridiculous Fishing* was a real education for Vlambeer, Ismail says, beyond even its founders' combined skills. "Working with Zach and Greg taught us that there was just so much to learn," he says, with Nijman crediting "nights writing spreadsheets to place fish and working out how much they were worth" to refine progression and balancing in later Vlambeer games. While it's structured like a free-to-play game, with similar hooks (Nijman even likens it to *Candy Crush*) it adopts a more ethical, responsible approach, not least by having a defined ending rather than encouraging players to keep coming back. "It feels like a free-to-play game, but it's actually good for you." Even so, its three-dollar price tag still proved somewhat controversial. "It was considered expensive – you weren't supposed to have a game on the iPhone that was over one dollar or free," Nijman adds. Still, the gamble eventually paid off. "It proved that we had the right idea, that we weren't necessarily being naive or not cynical enough."

more stress and it's just like, 'Hey, there's five more guns and three enemies'."

While adding all those extras was good for the game in some respects – and popular with the growing *Nuclear Throne* community – Ismail believes it ended up "over-complete". By the end of 2015, that familiar feeling of exhaustion had returned, and both knew it was time to draw a line under the project. "So we brokered a deal with Sony, to get the game out there in a fun, explosive, big way; a nice, Vlambeer-style finish," Ismail says. But the suddenness didn't sit well with everyone. "Nobody saw it coming," Nijman admits. "The community was like, 'What the hell, the game is done? Why?' But there's not much more we could have done."

Still, it was another successful launch for Vlambeer, both critically and commercially. That in turn gave its creators the latitude to take a well-earned break. And so they did, separating to pursue personal passions. For Ismail, that meant continuing his charity work and community projects, travelling around the world to promote industry diversity and amplify voices from studios in developing countries. For Nijman, it meant continued experiments in game design, but also realising his desire to make games in a more sustainable fashion. To which end, he made puzzle adventure *Minit* with Kitty Callis, Dominik Johann and Jukio Kallio, the game being credited to all four developers rather than a single studio name. "We didn't do any crunch," he says. "It was just a very leisurely project. My life became more about taking things a bit easier, and eating good food. I slowed down a bit, and in a way it was good for my craft."

The plan was for a year apart, which eventually turned into 18 months, by which time the two had reorganised their lives around their new priorities. Still, they were excited to get back to creating together once more, with the aim to recapture the studio's early days of smaller, simpler games – albeit with a healthier work schedule and a diet that no longer consisted of instant noodles and Coca-Cola. During a Nintendo Direct broadcast in early 2019, it announced Vlambeer Arcade, a planned collection of smaller games, starting with top-down shooter *Ultrabugs*. It was almost finished. But something had changed. There was no pressure any more, but there was no momentum either. "It was very smooth to get nothing done," Ismail says. "There were never any hard feelings or tiredness or annoyance, because this wasn't top priority for either of us," he shrugs. "When *Ultrabugs* happened, it happened. But JW had obviously changed his tempo and the way he worked. I had changed my focus to be way more about the community and growing access to our industry."

Whether they were pacing themselves or whether their other concerns had taken precedence, the pace of development slowed further and further. "We were both doing the things we cared about, and I think both of these things are important," Ismail says. "JW's flatter studio structure is the kind of beacon work that I really appreciate. It's something that you can hold up proudly, and it's incredibly important for the future of indie that people are trying these new structures."

Meanwhile, Ismail realised that his efforts to widen access to the game industry for developers, regardless of social and financial circumstance, meant little if he needed to be personally involved; that structure, in other words, needed reinforcement. "I realised that the things I do, *I* do. The network I have, *I* have. There's no externalised way of keeping that. Somebody once told me that you haven't built something well unless you can die, and it continues. And I realised there's not much I've built where that could happen."

From the start, Nijman says, both he and Ismail realised that Vlambeer ran better when each gave the other more space, which allowed them both to excel at what they do best. But perhaps now that space had grown too wide. "We got to the point where *Ultrabugs* has been almost done for a year and a half, but it's still not out. Maybe it was time to give each other the ultimate space, and do our own things." The end was never planned, but in late August the two amicably agreed that it was time for Vlambeer to call it a day. And with the studio's tenth anniversary just around the corner, why not go out with a bang? "Like always, it was like 'Alright, two weeks, let's get everything done and build a beautiful end to this company,'" Nijman says.

Despite the pair's evident disdain for the 'rockstar' tag, this is, we suggest, an exit befitting the term. "I think the problem is that it has a lot of connotations we don't necessarily like," Ismail says. "We're not loud for the sake of it. We always had very clear goals." Nijman attributes the studio's relative groundedness to its relatively gradual growth ("You get used to the spotlight, instead of suddenly blowing up,") while Ismail adds that it has benefitted from a number of happy accidents.

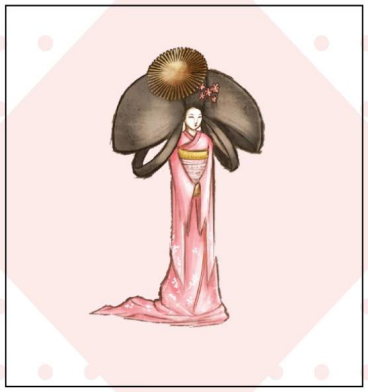
Becoming an industry spokesperson has been a natural result of his need to travel outside the Netherlands to promote Vlambeer's games. *Nuclear Throne*'s open development stemmed from concerns about being cloned again. "I also kind of hope that the rockstar era for indie games is over, because nothing really good came out of that," Nijman adds. "It idolises individuals while there's whole teams making games, and I think putting people on a pedestal also encourages really bad, diva-ish behaviour." Ismail agrees. "If you look at our industry, the rockstars from the 2010-2015 era of indie games all ended up in places that are at best questionable."

In an industry where developers rarely get the opportunity to go out on their own terms, Vlambeer's closure represents one last moment where it gets to set an example. Both parties are happy. The company's finances are in good shape. The two won't ever be best friends – "We always said we wouldn't invite each other to our birthdays," Nijman says, and Ismail immediately agrees – but it's evident there's plenty of mutual respect between the two, and both feel they've grown a great deal.

"It's been an incredible ride," Nijman says. "An unlikely fairytale of two very different people who somehow ended up in a company together in the right place at the right time and made this diverse portfolio of games about shooting things." Ismail, meanwhile, acknowledges his debt to Nijman for giving him the space to travel the world. "Vlambeer has given me many gifts, but seeing the world of game development… well, just seeing the world… there are no words for how lucky we've been," Ismail says, "or for how grateful I am to have done this thing with JW – even though we didn't see eye to eye, we always had each other's back."

While Vlambeer may be no more – at least once *Ultrabugs* finally comes out – its two figureheads aren't going anywhere. "I don't think me and JW will talk very much in the future," Ismail says, "but if there's ever anything I'm really stuck with that I need a moral check on, I'm pretty sure I would call JW first." His former colleague grins. "I'll send you an invoice." Ismail laughs. "Yeah, I'm sure you would." It's heartening to know that some things never change. ■

THE MAKING OF...



SHADOW TACTICS: BLADES OF THE SHOGUN

How reviving a dead genre pulled a studio back from the brink

By Alex Spencer

Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Developer Mimimi Games
Publisher Daedalic Entertainment
Origin Germany
Release 2016

When *Shadow Tactics: Blades Of The Shogun* released on December 6, 2016, it was the culmination not only of two years' development, but also of a near-lifelong dream for one of its creators, and a project they'd begun joking about almost a decade earlier. It also happened to be the date of the German Game Developer Awards. The Mimimi team travelled from their native Munich to Cologne and that night, *Shadow Tactics* swept the board.

"We were nominated in lots of categories, and we won almost all of them – four or five trophies," lead designer **Moritz Wagner** says. "All that, having this game launch, checking Steam and being number one in global top-sellers, being able to drink for free… it was a perfect night." At least, it was as long as they could ignore the fact that the studio might not make it into 2017. "People had in the back of their minds that basically everybody was terminated, except for a couple of us."

Mimimi had blown through its financial reserves finishing this game and didn't have another project lined up. So, while the rest of the team celebrated, studio founder and CEO Johannes Roth was working the room, trying desperately to find the next contract.

If it had all ended that night, it would have at least made for a neat bookend, given it all began with an award too. The team's first project was *DaWindci*, an app they made at university – Munich's Mediadesign Hochschule, a short walk from where the studio is now based – that won them the student prize at Apple's 2012 Design Awards. "That was the first huge boost we got," creative director **Dominik Abé** says. "And for that we already had to found a small company." After setting up that company to release the app, Abé and his team spent the next few years doing contract work and gradually hiring up everyone from their university days, until eventually the time came for Mimimi to make its first full game – *The Last Tinker: City Of Colors*, a mascot platformer that resolutely failed to set the world alight.

"It wasn't like we established Mimimi as the studio that can do super-successful 3D action platformers," Abé says. "So it wasn't like that was something we could really build on." On the plus side, this opened up the possibility of a very different project, one Abé had wanted to try for years: a revival of the isometric stealth tactics genre typified by (and, in truth, consisting almost

Of making *Shadow Tactics*, Wagner says, "We knew what we wanted to do. We just needed to figure out how to do it"

entirely of) *Commandos* and *Desperados*. "I have this strong childhood connection to those games," Abé says. "Reviving the genre, that was something I dreamed of in university."

His pitch to the rest of the team was simple: *Commandos*, with ninjas. The games Abé had loved had mined the Second World War and Wild West settings, so he wanted to transport

"WE CUT A LOT OF FEATURES… BECAUSE WE WANTED TO FOCUS ON GETTING THAT BASIC EXPERIENCE RIGHT"

their mechanics to feudal Japan. As for where the idea from this setting came from, Abé says the credit for that goes to Wagner: "At university, he was doing ninja rap videos." Yes, really.

"There was this hype in Germany for online rap battles," Wagner explains. "I was doing that, and I had a persona that was a ninja, basically." So one day, while thinking about *Commandos* – as usual – Abé passed his friend in the hallway, and put the two together. "I thought, 'Whoa, this game with a ninja setting? That would be the most awesome thing,'" he says. "I told Mo and we were like, 'Haha, one day we're gonna do that… yeah, never.' But then it happened."

Not everyone on the team had such a strong relationship with these games. Lead artist **Bianca Dörr** remembers the first time she heard about the project: "Dom came into the room and said, 'We want to make a *Commandos* with ninjas! How does that sound?' And we were like, 'Okay, great… what is *Commandos*?'" Dörr had never played either series. And she's far from alone in this. The genre had spluttered out in the early 2000s, and by this point was all but forgotten. "It was not very easy to get a publisher for the project, because everybody said: 'This genre is dead, it's kind of expensive to make and there must be a reason why nobody is making them any more,'" Abé says. "But we firmly believed in it."

The studio considered doing the project as a small-budget mobile game, but eventually it convinced Daedalic to publish a full-blown version for PC and consoles. "That was because they knew us from before in the German industry. We were always talking to them and they really liked what we were doing," Abé says. "Convincing somebody else would have been super-hard."

Because they were approaching the genres as fans, Abé, Wagner and fellow designer **Martin Hamberger** already had some insight into what worked and what didn't. "We understood what made the old *Commandos* games great," Wagner says. "And then we made only that. We cut a lot of features that would be awesome, because we wanted to focus on getting that basic experience right." These cuts included a mission editor and co-op multiplayer, features of the old games that Mimimi just didn't have scope for.

They also took their opportunity to address their own grievances, from overly situational character classes to the kind of exploits that, for a hardcore fan, could make the game trivially easy – chief among them, the existence of guns. "In *Commandos*, you could always just take three characters, go round the corner and just shoot in the same spot until you clear the map," Abé says. After a little deliberation, they took the Gordian approach. "We decided we weren't going to try and fix gun gameplay," Wagner says. "We'd cut it back to something that is very simple and easy, focus on the stealth, and ship it that way."

There were new challenges too – primarily, taking a genre whose home turf had always been mouse and keyboard and making it work on a gamepad. For answers, the team looked to two other games. There was *Diablo III*, which had brought the action RPG to controllers a few years earlier – "That was the one game that convinced me maybe anything is possible," Abé says. And then, of course, there was *Commandos*.

The second game in the series, *Men Of Courage*, had made its way to PS2. They ▶

played it, and it was incredibly clunky – "Doing an RTS on a console back then was black magic," Wagner says – but it did have one great idea: direct character controls. While these games normally have you queuing up commands with the cursor, Wagner says, "If I can control the character directly, it just feels very immersive." What was lost in precision, gamepad controls gained in feel.

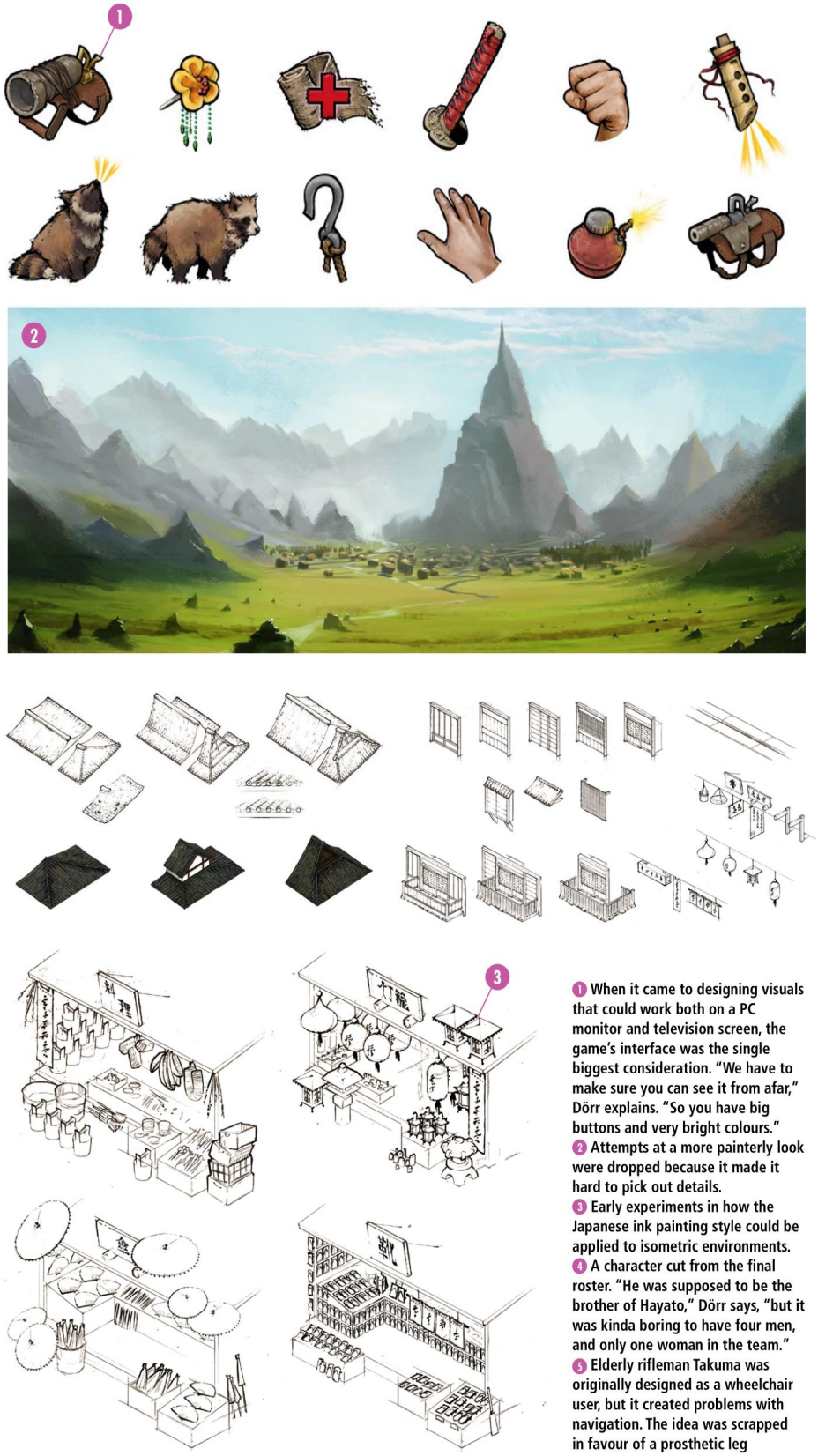
The console editions of *Shadow Tactics* arrived six months after PC, but controls were considered throughout development, something Wagner says improved both versions. "It helped for the usability of the whole game, I think, that we had to make it work on a gamepad." Abilities were dropped or reworked, and simplicity – not generally one of the genre's strengths – became a watchword.

The project continued, with a public beta in May 2016 helping Mimimi gather data on what was and wasn't working for players. Feedback was positive but, with development approaching the end of its projected 18 months, it became apparent that this wasn't enough time. The game was done, in terms of all content being in place, but it wasn't quite *there*. "We saw, every day we worked on it, it's just getting better and better," Abé says. Wagner chimes in with a quick summary of the to-do list: "Polishing; fixing bugs; working on the enemy setups to make them perfect, not just good."

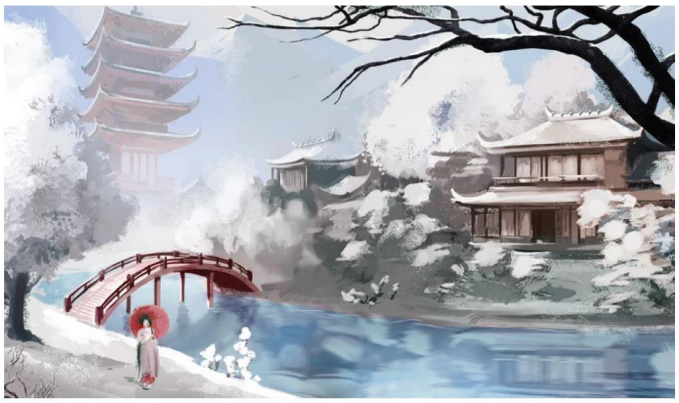
That idea of 'perfect, not good' was something that mattered to the team. Partly, this was practical. Because there'd been no game like it for the best part of a decade, Abé says. "We had no idea how this thing would work on the market." A small difference in the game's Metacritic score or Steam reviews could tip it over the edge, especially given that it would be fighting for attention with *The Last Guardian*, which came out the same day, and *Final Fantasy XV*, then a week old.

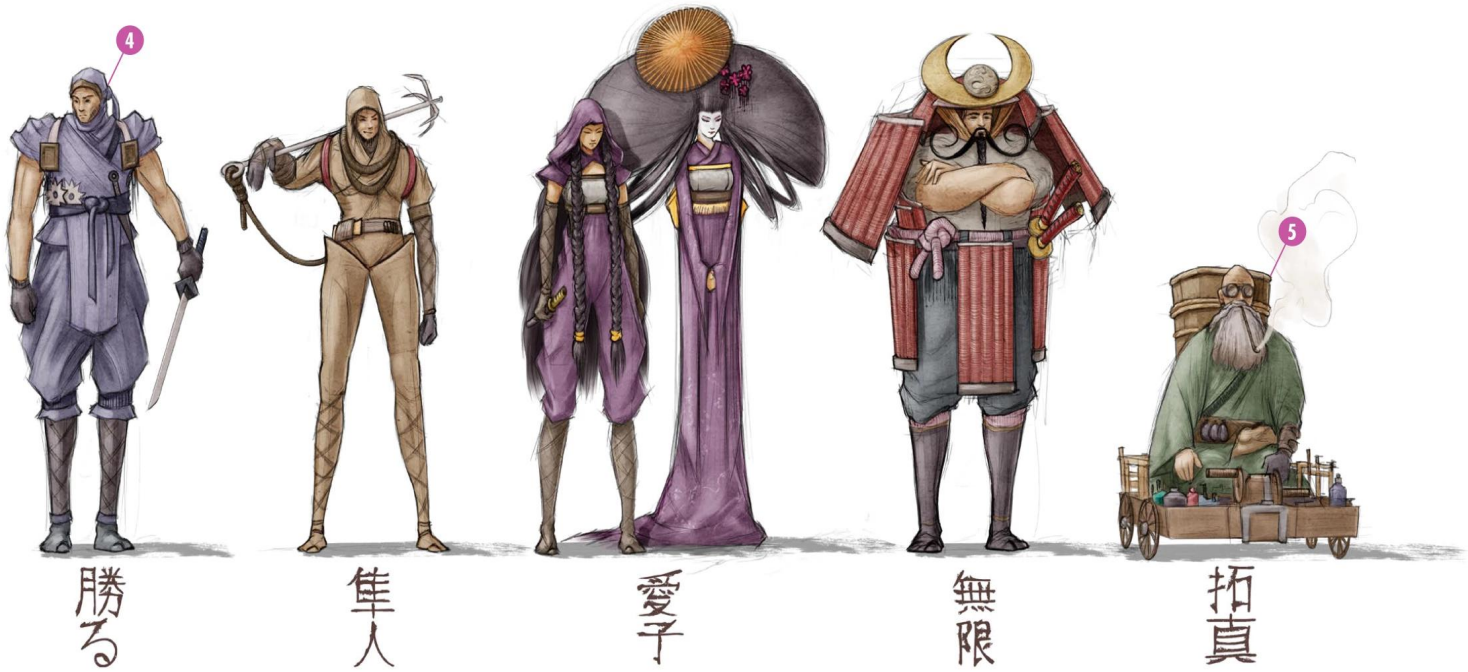
Besides, Mimimi didn't want to waste this hard-won opportunity to revive a genre everyone thought was dead. "We knew this was going be the one chance we had to try this," Abé says. "So you want to at least have the potential to succeed." By putting out a game as good as they could make, the team would be safe in the knowledge that, even if it failed, they'd done everything in their power to bring it back.

Publisher Daedalic could fund an extra month of development, but that wasn't enough to get *Shadow Tactics* to where Abé and the team wanted it to be. To do more, Mimimi would have to eat into its own finances. "Both us and Daedalic, we didn't have much money on the side any ▶



1 When it came to designing visuals that could work both on a PC monitor and television screen, the game's interface was the single biggest consideration. "We have to make sure you can see it from afar," Dörr explains. "So you have big buttons and very bright colours."
2 Attempts at a more painterly look were dropped because it made it hard to pick out details.
3 Early experiments in how the Japanese ink painting style could be applied to isometric environments.
4 A character cut from the final roster. "He was supposed to be the brother of Hayato," Dörr says, "but it was kinda boring to have four men, and only one woman in the team."
5 Elderly rifleman Takuma was originally designed as a wheelchair user, but it created problems with navigation. The idea was scrapped in favour of a prosthetic leg

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more," Abé says. This decision could be the thing that killed the studio.

So it was put to the vote. "Do we want to keep working on this and burn our resources and make the best game we can and maybe go out of business, or do we want to ship it the way it is?" Wagner says. "And the team voted." In the end, Mimimi funded an extra three months of development. This made it possible to release the game they wanted to make, but Abé and Wagner are eager not to glamorise it. "In hindsight, we were right with that decision – but still, we're not proud of it," Abé says. "That's something we never want to do again, to take that much of a risk."

When the game released, all the extra work paid off. The reviews, from press and Steam users, were great, and sales were beyond expectations – to date, on the most successful of the multiple stores and platforms it's available on, *Shadow Tactics* has sold 1.3m units. "It was a big relief, because nobody knew if there was an audience for this kind of game any more," Dörr recalls.

"The response was amazing, but on the other hand, it was the hardest phase in the company's history," Abé says. "We were really broke." Mimimi was still committed to doing the console port, revenue from *Shadow Tactics*' early sales would take a while to come through, and it didn't have that all-important next project lined up. Which is how the team came to be at an awards night, drinking to their success, knowing it might be the end of the company they'd been building since their student days. The majority of staff had been given notice that, unless the studio signed a contract in the next month, they'd be unemployed.

It would be another two weeks, right before Christmas, before the good news came through. "I think it was on December 23 when Johannes sent out the WhatsApp messages with, 'Okay, I got the deal. We're safe,'" Wagner says. That deal was with THQ Nordic to make *Desperados III*, continuing one of the dormant series that had inspired them in the first place.

THQ had picked up the Desperados rights, and Mimimi had pitched the idea of a sequel that summer – one of three potential projects the studio had its fingers crossed on – but it didn't have a final answer. "They liked the pitch, it was just a matter of, 'Is there a good business case to make this?'" Wagner says. It was clear the publisher was waiting to see how *Shadow Tactics* performed. "It was not exactly their first IP to work on," Abé admits. "And they knew we were going to finish a game in the same genre, so why not wait for it to come out?" *Shadow Tactics*' success was enough to convince THQ to greenlight *Desperados*, which enabled Mimimi to nix its termination notices.

Now, *Desperados III* has released, and seems to have been another success. Mimimi has its next project locked down, another stealth-tactics game codenamed 'Süßkartoffel' (German for sweet potato). And the genre itself seems to be sprouting anew, with a *Commandos* sequel coming from another German developer. "Our plan of 'We can bring that genre back'," Abé says, "it kind of worked out." And in turn, it was one of the genre's progenitors which saved the studio right back. ■

Q&A

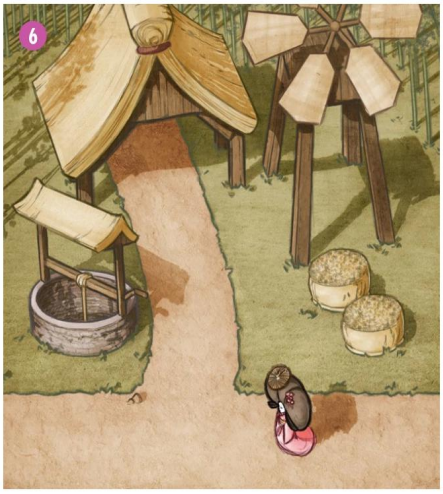
Bianca Dörr
Lead artist

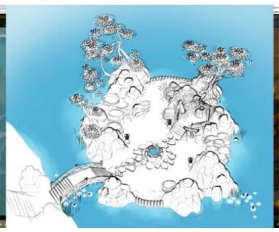
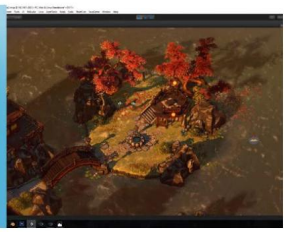
Visually, *Shadow Tactics* was a big jump from *The Last Tinker* – how did you manage that transition?
The jump was very hard for us. We were kind of stuck in the cutesy and cartoony style. The very first drawings we did [for *Shadow Tactics*], it was very round and cute. We knew that we couldn't make this kind of style because the audience was expecting something like *Commandos*... We started by overpainting some screenshots from *Commandos*, so we could capture that style.

What were your other visual touchstones?
We looked at Japanese paintings and ink drawings. I also looked at Ghibli films, and what level of detail they have. With the isometric perspective, we have a little bit of a problem with too much detail, so a cartoon or anime is always a good reference for us.

As a European studio, how did you approach making a game set in Japan?
Of the artists, I think maybe one had been to Japan before we made *Shadow Tactics*. We hired a consultant on Japanese culture and history, which was a big help.

What new challenges did working in an isometric perspective bring?
You can't have too much detail in the missions, because it disrupts the readability. If you have too much, you can't see where the characters are, or where they're supposed to go. And because you're always seeing them from above, you can't really see the characters' faces, which is a problem when you want to express emotions, so we had to find a way to give them a personality, so you can empathise with them.



6 An example of the game's early, more cutesy art style.
7 The isometric perspective could make things look "compressed," Dörr says – hence the game's exaggerated proportions.
8 Each character is colour-coded so you can tell them apart at a glance, even when the game starts putting the pressure on.
9 The game's visual style evolved significantly between its beta and final release.
10 "We changed so much during the whole production process," Dörr says. "We changed the lighting, the level of detail, the crispness. I don't think that the style was ever really finished until the very end."
11 An early concept showing how colour would be used to distinguish the player, enemies and neutral NPCs.
12 As well as giving each character a recognisable silhouette, Dörr and team tried to ensure their skills were visually readable: "Yuki is very agile, she jumps around and she's fast – and that's why she has to be a skinny girl, not a big strong armoured guy"

STUDIO PROFILE

CREEPY JAR

On leaving the big leagues and surviving the wilds of indie game development

By Chris Burke

Founded 2016
Employees 22
Key staff Krzysztof Kwiatek (CEO, art director), Krzysztof Sałek (board member, programmer), Barbara Grabska (pr & marketing manager), Michał Stawicki (lead game & narrative designer)
URL creepyjar.com
Selected softography *Ski Jumping* (with L'art) *Xpand Rally Xtreme, Dead Island, Dead Island: Riptide, Dying Light* (with Techland)
Current projects *Green Hell*

Leaving the safety of a steady job with an established game developer and going it alone is an adventurous move – it's a jungle out there, after all. But echoing the themes of its Amazonian survival game *Green Hell*, Creepy Jar's small team of Polish developers parted ways with Techland, where they had senior roles in the development of *Dead Island* and *Dying Light*, and set out to make their own way in the world.

Founding members **Krzysztof Kwiatek** and **Krzysztof Sałek** had been a partnership long before Techland came calling, their interest in game development formed through a mutual "addiction to games". As part of a studio called L'art, the two Krzysztofs' first game was 2003 ski-jumping sim, *Skoki Narciarskie: Polski Orzeł*. "At the time, ski-jumping was very popular in Poland because of Adam Malysz, who was a superstar here," Sałek recalls (indeed, Malysz himself graced the box art).

Buoyed by the success of this literal jumping-off point, Sałek and Kwiatek founded a new studio, Prominence, and turned their hand to a different kind of sim game, creating a prototype of an illegal street racer with the working title of *Dirty Roar*. The team's search for a publisher yielded interest from the Wrocław, Poland-based Techland, and while *Dirty Roar* itself was never completed, Techland was impressed enough by Prominence's demo that it hired the studio to create two other motorsport games, the Volkswagen-licensed *GTI Racing*, and rally sequel *Xpand Rally Xtreme*. By Sałek's own admission, the pair still had a lot to learn about game development – "We thought we knew how to create games after *Ski Jumping*, and it wasn't true!" – but the relationship would prove fruitful.

"We began pre-production on *Dead Island*," Sałek reveals. "The idea was from Techland, to create this zombie game, and in the beginning the project came to our company in Warsaw." The studio created a demo and showed it to a number of publishers, and with Deep Silver picking up the rights, the project grew exponentially. "Our team was just nine people at the time," Sałek says, "but they asked us to close our company and start the Warsaw division of Techland, and we ended up working there for eight years."

During this time, Sałek and Kwiatek found themselves working on some of Techland's biggest games, including *Dead Island: Riptide*, *Dying Light* and *Dying Light: The Following*. Their experience in creating firstperson survival-horror games would clearly later inform the direction of

Barbara Grabska, left, Creepy Jar PR and marketing manager and Krzysztof Sałek, programmer and studio co-founder

Green Hell, but despite the success of those games, the pair found that working for an ambitious and ever-expanding developer didn't suit them, and chose instead a different, if riskier, path. "Techland was a pretty huge company, particularly after *Dying Light*," Sałek says. "In Wrocław there were 300 people at the time, and 60 or 70 in Warsaw. Techland had plans to create big projects in Warsaw and it just wasn't something we wanted to do."

"WITH TEAMS OF AROUND 20 OR 30 PEOPLE YOU CAN MAKE QUICK DECISIONS AND BE VERY FLEXIBLE"

The initial leap into the wilds of indie game development could have been daunting, but any fear of leaving behind that safety net was far outweighed by the creative freedom that was now possible within a smaller setup. "With teams of around 20 or 30 people you can make quick decisions and be very flexible," Kwiatek says. "No directors, no main man – so with Creepy Jar we have a flat organisation in terms of management and it's something that works for us."

Free of the constraints of the big projects underway at Techland, however, the studio was far from set on the kind of game it wanted to make under its own flag. "We'd been thinking about a few things, like walking simulators," Sałek recalls. "It was a time when they were popular and easy to do, but we wanted to do something bigger. We'd been watching the rise of survival games and realised we could sell more of a survival game than a walking simulator."

It wasn't merely a question of chasing unit sales, however. Creepy Jar knew it needed to bring something more substantial to the growing survival genre and, inspired by indie games such as *The Forest* and *The Long Dark*, set about building its game in Unity with two key pillars informing its direction – the ultra-realism of the survival elements and the game's rainforest setting. "The Amazon is the most challenging environment in the world to survive in," says Sałek. "It's the most rich in plants and animals, and the indigenous population has unique survival techniques." The perfect place to get lost, in other words.

"Great potential," agrees Kwiatek, "but it was also very challenging to reconstruct the environment in-game because the hardware is always limited in some way – we have to do tricks to reconstruct the density of the jungle, but luckily we had a lot of experience with a similar environment previously with *Dead Island*."

If Creepy Jar was to achieve its goals with *Green Hell*, more talent needed to be brought on board and the Krzysztofs mined their previous employer for the best and brightest developers. "We started with just four people, and our first step was to hire our old colleagues," Sałek says. "Michał [Stawicki, lead game and narrative designer] was one of the first we hired, but we still had a maximum of 14 people at that time."

"We wanted to work with the best people," confirms Kwiatek, "so our goal was to hire people with great experience in development. We expanded the team, we got more people from Techland, and now we have about 20 people here, and 15 of those are from Techland."

With the right people in place, the next step was to figure out *Green Hell*'s abundance of mechanics that simulate realistic survival ▶

The team of 22 has recently divided into two teams, one working on *Green Hell* and the other starting work on a new project. Kwiatek: "We have flexible working hours, we're trying to not crunch too much but of course sometimes we have to"

imperatives, elements that make staying alive more challenging and more rewarding.

"When we started, a lot of survival games were popping up and they are quite easy to make, in terms of the basics," Michał Stawicki tells us. "A bunch of them were lacking the realism, the survival side of a survival game. We decided to go more hardcore, to get more of the feel of having to really survive."

It was time to call in the experts. "We talked to experts in botany, and every plant in the game is a real plant with real effects," Stawicki confirms. "We were going for everything being physical in the game – you get wounds and we use the real indigenous people's way of treating them. In a typical survival game you have a wound, so you go find a bandage, and that's it. We wanted to expand that, to feel real so when you cut yourself you have to wander through the jungle and find the right plant, clean the tissue and wrap it."

Noting that physical and mental health each impact each other, the team hit the books of survival expert Ed Stafford to learn more about not just the techniques but the psychology of surviving. Incorporating these elements, and a growing wishlist of ideas, meanwhile, meant that even as launch day approached, the team was still tinkering under the hood.

"We did almost everything we wanted to do," Stawicki says. "The main problem was that if you take away one element it wouldn't work: the physical stuff, the psychological elements, they all had to be right. Even a few months before Early Access we didn't have a playable version, every day it got better and better and suddenly a few days before launch it all came together."

Happily that last minute attentiveness was repaid – *Green Hell* was an immediate success on Steam and it has now surpassed one million sales. The year-long Early Access period that followed allowed Creepy Jar to fine-tune the game with regular updates, noting the requests of the game's growing community of fans and developing the game around the players.

"The community is the best source of ideas," marketing manager **Barbara Grabska** tells us. "They're the ones buying the game so we want to provide what they are asking for. Of course we have our own list. When the game was in development we had a lot of ideas but not every idea could be implemented. Add those to the ones from the community and it's a lot!"

Creepy Jar's player-focused approach to development and independent spirit is something the team is extremely proud of. Its flat management hierarchy means the company's board is made up of the key creatives who are very much entrenched in the ongoing development of the game, allowing the focus to be on the quality of *Green Hell* above all else.

"Basically we're trying to avoid everything that big companies have," Kwiatek says, "like publishers that require you to have something ready on time, and it allows us to be flexible. If we want to add something to the next patch at the last minute and we feel that we have to postpone the patch till the next week, then we won't release it."

"Our first project was a great success," Grabska enthuses, "but we did it with our independence and proved we can still be a small team not in thrall to a big corporation. We are all proud of the people we have here, they still want to create games, they still want to be creative. And they are not fed up yet, surprisingly, after four years of *Green Hell*!"

Despite the game's continuing development, not to mention plans to launch on consoles in the near future, the small Warsaw team already has its sights set on its next project – one that it hopes will similarly stand-out from the crowd.

"It's still a small team working on ideas," Stawicki reveals. "With *Green Hell* we wanted something new for survival games, and now we are looking for something new for base-building games – it will be a sci-fi firstperson base-building game… with a suitable twist."

"WE ARE PROUD OF THE PEOPLE WE HAVE HERE, THEY WANT TO CREATE GAMES, THEY WANT TO BE CREATIVE"

"We want to create games where we think about, 'what kind of player is it for?'" Sałek says of the studio's ambitions. "How many players want to play in your idea? It's no good if only you as a creator want to play this game." Despite the realism to be found in *Green Hell*, Sałek also believes in presenting games that appeal to players' own dreams of adventure. "What kind of fantasy the game offers you should be clear. It should be a common fantasy – and we can provide that." If Creepy Jar's success with *Green Hell*'s particular fantasy has proved anything, it's that an adventurous, independent spirit can be the key to more than simply surviving in the jungle, but positively thriving. ■

1 *Green Hell*'s rainforest is filled with all manner of dangers to defend against. 2 *GTI Racing* and 3 *Xpand Rally Xtreme*. 4 Concept art for your character in *Green Hell*. 5 The team worked on *Dying Light* for Techland before striking out on their own. 6 *Dead Island*'s tropical setting led to more beach-themed character costumes

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Hades
PC, Switch
We're happy (and relieved) to report that the Switch port of Supergiant's blistering Roguelike is exemplary – infrequent and mild framerate drops notwithstanding. But with cross-save absent at launch, we return to our completed Steam save to discover that, contrary to our Post Script suggestion last month, Supergiant has included the comedy deaths from Early Access. The studio really *has* thought of everything; if anything, that 9 now seems a little harsh.

Super Mario Sunshine
Switch
If Nintendo's 3D All-Stars collection is a low-effort way to mark Mario's latest milestone, the quality of two of the three featured games is hard to deny. *Sunshine* remains a characterful oddity: it's clearly unfinished in places, but its H_2O-assisted platforming, unusual objectives and evocative tropical setting – looking all the more attractive in widescreen – largely compensates for the handful of low points. That pachinko level can still do one, mind.

Gunsport
Stadia
'Development hell' doesn't quite cover the woes that have beset Necrosoft's arcade-style futuresport, with Google its unlikely rescuer. It's volleyball with guns, with a static keeper and leaping striker on either side, each 'goal' scoring more the longer a rally is sustained. There's big *Windjammers* energy here, not least thanks to SNK-inspired sprites. Alas, Stadia, multiplayer and spotty Wi-Fi don't mix, so we'll hold off on a verdict until the console release.

Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

90 Marvel's Avengers
PC, PS4, PS5, Stadia, Xbox One, Xbox Series

94 Crusader Kings III
PC

98 Paradise Killer
PC, Switch

100 Pendragon
PC

102 I Am Dead
PC, Switch

104 A Monster's Expedition (Through Puzzling Exhibitions)
iOS, PC

105 Moon
Switch

106 Tell Me Why
PC, Xbox One

107 Star Renegades
PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

This is my truth, tell me yours

We've been thinking about the Rashomon effect this month, with several games encouraging us to consider events from different perspectives. Dontnod's latest episodic adventure *Tell Me Why* (p106) explicitly invokes Kurosawa's masterpiece in one scene. The player must choose between two conflicting accounts, with the awareness that their decision might strengthen or weaken the psychic bond between twins Alyson and Tyler. Yet the central plot betrays that fascinating conceit, leaving no space for interpretation.

Gaudy murder mystery *Paradise Killer* (p98) doesn't mention Rashomon by name, yet its idiosyncratic investigation is truer to Kurosawa's approach. We end up with a series of contradictory accounts to pick over, the game letting us come up with our own picture of how things played out. If that all but rules out any late-game surprises, the process of finding your own truth through the facts you've uncovered is equally exciting. Inkle's *Pendragon* (p100) goes one step further. As you guide various figures from Arthurian legend towards a fateful confrontation, their motives and perspectives lend new meaning and resonance to friendly and adversarial encounters alike.

Two of this month's standout games also leave plenty of gaps for us to fill. The sprawling *Crusader Kings III* (p94) might span hundreds of years, but its stories still feel intimate, each event giving you just enough narrative detail for your imagination to do the rest. *A Monster's Expedition (Through Puzzling Exhibitions)* (p104) takes the concept more literally, as you roll logs to form bridges between islands. Your reward is some of the most delightful writing we've encountered all year. It's a reminder that the best videogame storytellers understand the value of getting the player to do some of the work. The truth is out there, they say – now go and find it.

Marvel's Avengers

Developer Crystal Dynamics, Eidos Montreal
Publisher Square Enix
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Stadia, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now (PC, PS4, Stadia, Xbox One), November 10 (Xbox Series), November 12 (PS5)

The comic book industry has long divvied up its own history over a Golden Age, a Silver Age, and then, perhaps realising where this pattern would end up, a 'Modern Age' that began in the 1980s and remains ongoing. Such designations now seem almost quaint next to the cinematic age of the superhero which, over the last decade in particular, has dominated the box office and recently culminated in the highest-grossing film of all time. The mass market has never loved spandex more and, with Hollywood conquered, games are the next medium in line.

Marvel's Avengers is far from the first Marvel videogame, and is not even the vanguard for this new age of mega-budget would-be blockbusters (that would be 2018's excellent *Marvel's Spider-Man*). It owes a debt to the knockabout *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* series, as well as Rocksteady's *Arkham* games. But be under no illusions, true believers: this has ambitions beyond any superhero game in history.

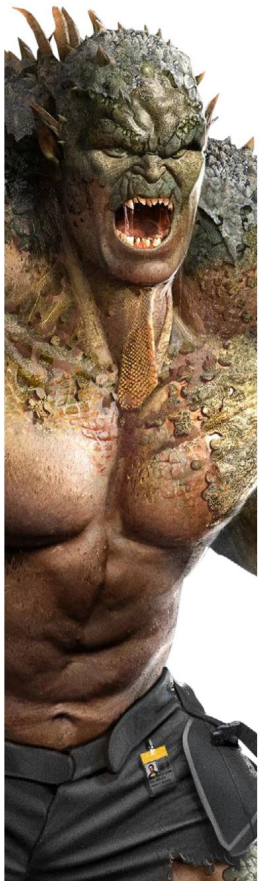
So, as Cap shields his eyes and looks out across one of this world's glorious, verdant vistas, the sun shines down on a service game. *Marvel's Avengers* is a weird experience, and the first part of that feeling comes from a campaign which is by turns exhilarating and dull, then turns out to have borne little relation to what you'll be doing in multiplayer. This is not an inherently bad idea. The singleplayer campaign opens with a well-executed sequence that introduces the Avengers, with no little charm, through the eyes of Kamala Khan, who in this opening is a fan but will soon become the story's focus. As things inevitably go wrong, you're shuffled between Avengers and given control for brief-but-bravura action sequences, and there's a big bang at the end.

We pick up five years later and, as the new Ms. Marvel, start about reuniting the original five Avengers. This involves a mix of heavily on-rails platforming, a bit of fighting, plenty of cutscenes, and a hugely disappointing lineup of villains. By our count, there are three bona-fide supervillains in this game (Taskmaste, Abomination and Modok), while various other bosses are humans in mech suits, giant robots or, if you're really lucky, a hovering robot warship.

When you consider the history of the Avengers this seems incredible. *Marvel's Spider-Man* understood that, while you might have Doctor Octopus cackling away throughout the campaign, it was important to give players a procession of colourful B-listers on the way to him. Going by the combat experience of *Marvel's Avengers*, Captain America's deadliest opponents are the flame vents on big robots. Sega's awful PS3-era Iron Man game had a better selection of supervillains.

What saves *Marvel's Avengers*, just about, is the team itself, several high-energy set-pieces, and a combat system that has flaws but also serious potential. The six team members (unlocked by completing the campaign) all feel distinctive, with the brawling high-impact style of Captain America a world away from the hover-diveslam-rockets loops of Iron Man. With both the latter hero and Thor, one of the areas that deserves particular credit is flight – perhaps the most iconic of all superpowers, but also one that games have had enormous trouble realising in the past. This isn't perfect: there's a relatively low ceiling, the transition from hovering to moving forwards feels a little awkward, and your top speed is not fast enough. But those nitpicks remain just that, because flying works. There's a wonderful frisson when you notice a teammate in trouble and, over breathless seconds, arc bodily over the battlefield and slam down to help in a burst of lightning.

This has ambitions beyond any superhero game in history



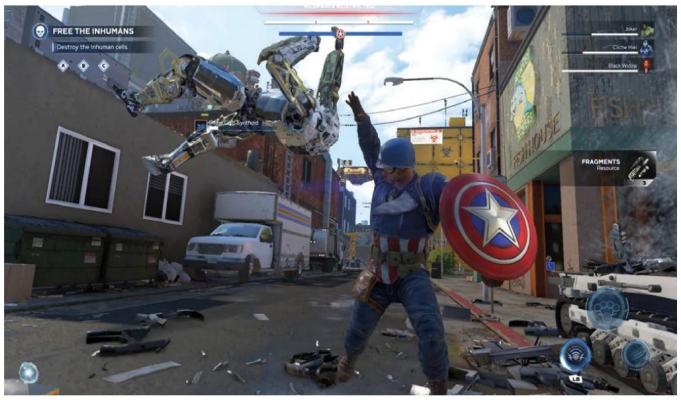
All characters, with the exception of the rather plodding Hulk, have something in their core moveset that the others don't: whether that's the stretchy crowd control of Ms. Marvel and the sheer joy of whomping something with a giant boot in mid-air, or Black Widow's Dante-esque pistols, which are stuffed with ammo and empty just as fast as you can pull the trigger. Each also has their own extensive skill tree that is largely to be explored in multiplayer, which builds out a basic moveset quickly before requiring players to specialise across three skills that can reach ludicrous levels of power.

The combat basics are a light/heavy attack combo system, a time-slowing dodge, a parry, lavishly-animated finishers on stunned enemies, and (mostly excellent) special moves. We're not in the land of Platinum Games here, but the enemy animations are readable, the timings and audio cues are precise, and the emphasis is on the player characters fighting lots of enemies at once. To that end, most characters' ultimate attacks will shred through everything outside of bosses, and you almost feel sorry for some enemy mobs as they shatter beneath a bunch of pent-up specials. The excess here is the right call, letting players feel overpowered for a brief period and shimmering a little stardust over the moment-to-moment brawling.

Almost. The combat's biggest failing is a camera that doesn't know whether it wants traditional shoulder shots or wide views which, combined with a lock-on that's never in a hurry to move anywhere, forces the player into a lot of manual readjustments and sweeps. After some parameter-fiddling in the options menu the general experience can be made a little smoother, but close-up transitions to finishing moves regularly serve up a clippy mess, and getting caught with your back against the wall usually sees things go haywire.

Zooming out to the bigger picture ourselves, one of the odd moments in *Avengers* comes after the team reassembles, which is when you realise the core of the game is wildly different from what you've spent the last ▶

RIGHT Most of the campaign's climactic moments involve the seventh Avenger, Captain QTE, but the pace and visual imagination of these sequences makes up for the temporary loss of control.
BELOW Skins are sneakily handled. You'll eventually (emphasis on eventually) unlock what the developers would claim are dozens of skins for each character by playing. But that number can include a dozen or more minor variants on a single design. The truly distinctive costumes, with one or two exceptions, are in the shop.
BOTTOM Not pictured: Spider-Man. Marvel's best character appears in the PlayStation versions of the game, but not on PC or Xbox



ABOVE When Avengers HQ is back up-and-running it acts as the game's hub. A particular irritation is one item vendor right at the back of the ship, who requires a round trip of a few minutes whenever you want to check in

dozen hours doing. This activity consists of large-ish but simple open-world maps, filled with robot clusters and loot boxes, around which you tear in a team of four. Straight-up fights come alongside missions that require you control a given point, or destroy a particular object, but this is about one thing: the repeated application of Avenging boots to countless thousands of robotic behinds, over and over, with no Excelsior in sight. What makes this work on repeat is multiplayer, once again, amping-up the spectacle and your enjoyment of it.

Where in the campaign these moments are more scripted, here they emerge amidst chaos, and are all the more rewarding for it. At times, this seems like brilliant fun, and it's always when the player's fighting their own fight but can see Hulk go crackers in the background on another lot, while Iron Man shoots overhead and Ms. Marvel stomps around at five times her usual size slapping baddies about like wet sourdough.

This side of *Avengers* can be pure fun, but the endgame is nevertheless half-baked. The loot system is utterly unremarkable and links to the action in inconsequential ways (see Post Script). Much more concerning is that, played a few weeks after release, *Avengers* is an unreliable online experience with a tendency to either go completely on the fritz for hours or drop players mid-game. We spend an hour trying to enter a lobby with a friend, to no avail. On other evenings, it works for a couple of hours, then simply disbands a strike team with no warning. All of which would be less irritating if the loading times weren't so painfully long. It's inevitable that *Avengers* will improve in this area, but at times it simply falls apart.

There's an aspect to games like *Avengers* – the type with multi-year ambitions, where the initial product undergoes a radical transformation over its early months or years as a live game. You can get even more extreme: recent examples like EA's *Anthem*, Amazon's *Crucible*, or even Valve's *Artifact* have been withdrawn from the market entirely to undergo re-development. While *Avengers* is not in that wheelhouse, it does feel like this will be a much better game in a year. There's the foundation of a decent multiplayer brawler, but not much else atop that, and the sheer repetition begins to rapidly pall. The villain problem begins to rear its head again, with few missions that truly feel like events. The Avengers are supposed to be the world's greatest superheroes but, as you smash through yet another wave of robots, we long for the kind of foil that could make them feel like that. More robots with bigger health bars is all players get.

Marvel's Avengers has a lot of good parts, a lot of indifferent ones, and an overall lack of direction. The long-term question is where multiplayer goes from here because, as things stand, this won't be giving Bungie any sleepless nights. The more immediate one for would-be Avengers is whether you're willing to meet the game halfway. If you want a decent singleplayer campaign with big explosions and sharp writing, this delivers. If you like the idea of playing a multiplayer superhero brawler with these characters, then some of the time, this is your game. But key elements are all over the place. If you want some sort of MCU-as-a-service game, this ain't it. Maybe one day – but right now this superhero sandbox comes with far too much assembly required. **6**

KAMALA CHAMELEON
One of *Avengers*' biggest achievements is its original take on an Avengers story which, told through excellent writing and voice-acting, manages to step out from the MCU's long shadow. The decision to focus the story around newcomer Kamala Khan helps enormously here: she's both a non-movie character who instantly feels at home in this universe, and a fresh face that grows into an Avenger. There's much more to enjoy too, from a winningly morose – no, really – Bruce Banner to an Iron Man that, while definitely inspired by aspects of Downey Jr.'s performance, never leaves you longing for him. Crafting a world that felt distinct from the behemoth movies was one of this game's biggest challenges, and it succeeds with no little charm and style.

One of Thor's biggest distinctions is the throw-and-return action of Mjolnir, which feels lifted wholesale from that recent scourge of Asgard, Kratos. His skill tree builds on this, too, for lightning-packed fastball after fastball

Post Script

Why Marvel's Avengers' gear system is full of hot air

Perhaps the English language is trying to tell us something with the horrible industry initialism for games as a service, GAAS. Try busting that one out in polite conversation and see who smiles. But maybe there's a bit of truth there, too. This style of videogame, designed to captivate a playerbase in the millions over multiple years, is one that many publishers and developers have invested heavily in yet somehow failed to grasp. Making a videogame is hard. Making one that people can play for years without getting bored? Few succeed.

Marvel's Avengers is designed to be something with a long tail, something that morphs over the years, accumulates piles of content, and sustains a large and profitable playerbase. To this end there are many elements that will be familiar from other service games, not all of which feel well-integrated into the kind of game this is. The prime culprit is a loot system which – despite *Marvel's Avengers* being based around rewarding players with loot – is so very dull. Each character has five gear slots, two minor artefact slots and a major artefact slot. You pick up things that go in these slots from defeated enemies and chests, then equip the one with the biggest number (or more rarely, a good buff). Rinse, repeat, and never get attached, because it'll be gone in a few minutes.

Avengers also lifts some of the more obnoxious elements of service game loot systems, without ever thinking about why they were there in the first place. In *Destiny*, limited storage space means you have to occasionally enter your inventory and dismantle unwanted gear piece-by-piece. This was never especially engaging – but here loot drops are less regular, it's easy to avoid picking up low-level gear, and there are long loading sequences in which to do the busywork. *Avengers* has the long loading screens, and the dismantling of the gear piece-by-piece, but so much more loot is thrown at the player, and none of it feels unique. This small process, a background exercise as conceived by the competition, becomes a drag in the imitator.

The question of why loot in some games feels meaningful comes down to how integrated that system is with the core activity. In other words, players value gear because of how they got it. Consider *Monster Hunter*, where gaining an armour set means slaying a particular beast multiple times and spending enormous amounts of cash. That gear doesn't pop out of chests, but is worked towards, earned, and then the player has the dual reward of the visual appearance and improved stats.

Avengers doesn't have the world for such a neat thematic fit, but the aspect it really fails at is the upgrades' lack of impact. The gear improves your stats, and after a certain point all of it comes with minor buffs and further unlockable benefits, but not one item will make your character feel different in the moment-to-moment combat. The player never gets the sense of a superhero using an awesome new chest-plate or shield, so much as a pawnbroker going through costume jewellery.

Destiny's finest weapons and armour are painstakingly assembled over many multiple-hour events that require enormous coordination and teamwork, and so are invested with that memory in some small sense. In both this and *Monster Hunter*'s case, all of that meaning is being ascribed by the player. We make this stuff meaningful for ourselves, and we do it because the core activity in both games is best-in-class and inseparable from the rewards we strive for. This may be the ultimate undoing of *Avengers*. As a combat game this works, and it looks a treat too, but it doesn't hit that highest level of polish and refinement that makes you want to do it again and again.

> It doesn't hit that highest level of polish and refinement that makes you want to do it again and again

The strangest aspect of this is that there are few licences out there that suit the idea of collectibles and loot and characters better than the Marvel Universe. This game includes comic books that grant minor buffs, which you can examine the covers of, but it never quite dives into that wider world in the way that, say, a *Lego* game does. Let's not get too Comic Book Guy about it, but plenty of alternative loadouts and one-off pieces of gear have already been invented for these characters over the years. Almost any reference to such stuff comes on the cosmetic side of the game – basically, the many character costumes for sale – and *Avengers* is extremely stingy with its regular players in this regard, meaning those who've 'only' paid £60 for the base game have to really grind for an extra costume. That's not to say "Microtransation bad, Hulk Smash!" But it is notable that *Avengers* fails to make its gear system distinctive and interesting, and that's the part that ties into the action, while there's so much character locked away in the shop. The balance is wrong.

Avengers may well recover from this shaky start, and build the community it wants. There's nevertheless a shallowness to this game's systems, whereby they're layered atop one another rather than working together. That won't bother those who just want the superhero brawler experience, but it precludes any longer-term investment. This might seem like placing too much emphasis on trinkets; perhaps it is. But when a player can sense that there's no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, there's little motivation to keep trying to get there. ■

Crusader Kings III

The early medieval period, as *Crusader Kings III* paints it on its seductive world map, is a time of affectionless psychopathy. Less a game of nations, this is instead a grand strategy game about smaller, more intimate stories. And all of them are about furthering your bloodline. It teaches you to view people only in terms of what their personalities and genetics can do for your claim to the throne, and ultimately, that everyone's a massive liability who's just as likely to catch a debilitating STD as they are to plot your death, or perform their job as your steward. It is, of course, wonderfully compelling.

Paradox's breed of strategy has never lacked depth or long-form intrigue. Historically, though, grappling with the myriad systems of a *Crusader Kings* game felt a bit like learning to code the game yourself, on the fly. You had a fuzzy sense of how you wanted to impact the world, but little clue as to where in the stack of menus to click first to start doing it. The most significant change about its threequel is a newfound friendliness about the UI, and an essential tutorial that tacitly acknowledges how daunting this all must be for newcomers. Through this, and a never-ending stream of tooltips, the interconnected mechanics begin to reveal themselves more clearly than they ever did before. Money, dread, renown, titles, claims – all crucial currencies gathered from elements as disparate as arranged marriages and horse-riding accidents – all become rote before the 11th century's over.

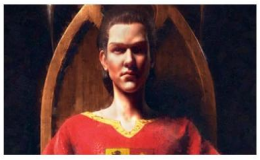
What the tutorial does best, however, is getting you embroiled in the politicking of 1070s Ireland. There's a sandbox as big as the explored world waiting to indulge your most specific historical hypotheticals – a Holy Roman Empire run as a matriarchy, Africa united under Spanish rule – but all that can wait until the sadistic vassal of Ulster is assassinated, your son's child bride passes her congenital genius down the Munster bloodline, and Ireland – all of Ireland – becomes yours.

Cleverly, it holds your focus on these intimate human stories while keeping the vast world map and its thousands of dynasties ticking over. If you looked at the patchwork of national borders on the world map as a to-do list, as *Total War* or *Civilization* often encourage you to, it'd be impossibly daunting. But you're in charge of your own objectives here, and there's a curious satisfaction in being unambitious: you need never interact with the Byzantine empire if you don't want. The borders immediately beside your starting realm can stay just as they are. In its simplest form, *Crusader Kings III* keeps going as long as your immediate family does.

Which is a wonderful take on medieval history, isn't it? King Charlemagne probably spent a lot more time contemplating his own family tree than the borders of empires far beyond his own, and the entire period of history is dominated by people who simply happened to have been born into a family who'd long ago convinced the masses they had a divine right to rule over them.

Developer Paradox Development Studio
Publisher Paradox Interactive
Format PC
Release Out now

Your Spymaster might be a lazy, sadistic, frail malcontent, but he's also your nephew



LIFESTYLES OF THE RICH AND PIOUS
Beyond a character's traits and stats, they're drawn in more detail by their chosen lifestyle. Determined by the player, they offer a choice of five upgrade trees, each showering the character with stat boosts. A leader looking for a leg-up with religious matters might opt for the pious path, while a king with a more charismatic bent might plump for chivalry. While the messy, chaotic, organic humans of real history tend to have adhered to one lifestyle, more or less, *Crusader Kings*' lot reinvent themselves like wizened pop stars, entering a metamorphosis every five years that might swing from one extreme to the next. That single decision might change how everyone in the world feels about that individual. And yes, everyone in the world has an opinion on everyone else.

This being a game about people, it's a meaningful step forward that each person is now drawn as a 3D render when you right-click their portraits. Inevitably there are some unnerving doppelgängers out there, but considering the sheer number of bodies in every court of every kingdom that's forgivable. Besides, it's the stats and traits that tell the story, not the visuals.

Take the appalled bishop Petrus Guaiferidi, for example, who misinterpreted Petty King Murchad's plot to sway him into friendship with the Irish king as a romantic advance. Imagine the tense relations that followed. Or the incompetent steward Doelgus, who seemed to haemorrhage legitimate claims to his king's realms on an almost monthly basis and eventually turned his back on catholicism. Queen Mentzia, whose traits, claims and beauty made her the ideal bride for Munster's heir, but whose proclivity for extramarital sex left the line of legitimate succession in a tangle.

And while some of these period-set soap operas occur via the machinations of *Crusader Kings III*'s 'random' events (actually all the result of character decisions throughout the world), a good deal of them are your own doing. You knew the risks of inbreeding – you saw what it did to the barren De Jures of Rouergue, but you chose to preserve those traits at the risk of infertility and congenital defects. Your Spymaster might be a lazy, sadistic, frail malcontent who actively dislikes you, but he's also your nephew.

Swords are drawn, from time to time, you understand. It's not the default action of the ambitious king, but when diplomacy, tactical marrying and outright death plots fail, war's there waiting. As before you need a legitimate reason to wage war, but with the help of a corrupt pope or a suspect bit of paper, the word 'legitimate' can be stretched well beyond its reasonable limits. This is the one area *Crusader Kings III* doesn't lavish formidable levels of detail on, with battles playing out with quick one-on-one unit animations. Raising and moving armies is easier than before, however, and a clearer menu layout makes managing troops a simpler facet of a ruler's duties.

There are just two start points in history this time, 867 or 1066, and your dynasty runs until the fall of the Byzantine empire in – spoilers – the 1450s. By Sid Meier standards that's a mere blip in civilisation's great timeline, but by making your story so personal and rich with historical histrionics *Crusader Kings III* somehow feels all the more expansive in scale. It still requires a deeper commitment than most games ask for, but the rewards positively tumble forth, year after year, generation after generation, treacherous vassal after treacherous vassal.

9

ABOVE The explored world. It's extraordinary to think that every member of every court in every country has an opinion of you, which is swayed by your actions turn-by-turn. News travels fast, it seems

TOP The tutorial setup proves too alluring to leave alone once the pops are over and done with – a small, manageable island full of Petty Kings ready to be vassalised. ABOVE As ever with *CK*, its various map views are illustrated beautifully and break down exactly which portions of land belong to who by claim, culture, and faith. RIGHT The new animated characters do a lot for *CKIII*'s personality, although they're some way short of *Civ VI* for emoting

Every new event is the result of either your actions or someone else's somewhere in the game world

Post Script

Another game to successfully subvert a sacrosanct literary rule: show, don't tell

For decades, the medium's trajectory was unwavering: lines of text were to be replaced by 2D scenes, then 3D objects, then fully interactive environments with soft shadows and discernible pores on each character's mocapped face. By the late 2000s, a passage of text was an admission of failure on a technical level: we couldn't render this thing happening, so, here, read about it instead.

The indie gaming boom began to change the consensus on reams of writing, though. Viable digital distribution meant smaller target audiences, including players with a nostalgia for text adventures and 8bit visuals, both of which proved a necessity for single-person teams making their first titles. But that nostalgia quickly gave way to evolution and innovation as *Dear Esther* and *Emily Is Away* created new forms of text adventure, where what the player isn't shown is a deliberate and crucial part of the experience.

Even now it's often a pragmatic design call as much as an artistic one to convey something in written language instead of visuals, and if the small teams behind *Sunless Sea* and *Kentucky Route Zero* had committed to bringing every scene to life in Unreal Engine we'd still be waiting for their release in 2030. Of course, if they had done that, neither game would be anywhere near as good as it is.

As any *Football Manager* devotee will tell you, the less a game shows us, the more active we are in filling in the gaps. *Crusader Kings III* appreciates the subtlety of telling you *just* enough to spark your imagination. In the gaps where the writing leaves mystery, you pour your own fanciful thoughts. *What must the knights of my court think of me now I'm wounded and disfigured? What was it that made my wife go and have an affair? I bet that hunt I went on was brilliant fun.* If every random event triggered a fully voiced cutscene, they simply wouldn't mean as much, because they wouldn't require anything from you.

This active participation you fall into is a clever combination of player-controlled pace, evocative but sparing descriptions of events, and a knowledge that each event's triggered either by a decision you made, or a decision someone else did. They're only as random as life itself is – the diplomatic summit you might find yourself invited to is a ripple from a far-off ruler's decision to pursue a diplomatic lifestyle at some point in the last decade.

In truth, we're probably still a long way from the era when all of *Crusader Kings III*'s medieval subterfuge could be rendered as animated events. With core rules like a German board game, the sheer complexity of its underlying systems and the number of permutations to arise from its variables is the stuff of a Brian Cox monologue. But long before they reach the point when they feasibly could show the player everything, designers understand it's often best to tell them instead.

In the rare instances like *Crusader Kings III* when they do it so well, every player's story becomes as personal as a teenage diary and absolutely unique, never to be repeated by another player. Perhaps they're rare because they ask so much of the player. Just as it seems a tall order to memorise all the levels of both medieval hierarchy and in-game menus, and so many other aspects of the typical Paradox grand strategy experience. Some players don't want the burden of such active authorship, and they're probably the same players who feel turned off by the absence of explicit objectives in this game.

These players are immune to Paradox titles' especially evangelical acolytes, who adore a 20-deep stack of menus as much as an archaic political system. But what everyone can agree is that it's often best to directly contradict your old creative writing lecturer: in games, at least, it's often better to tell than to show. ■

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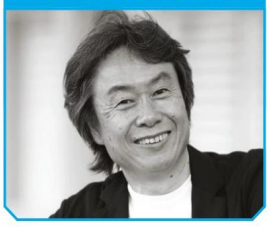

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Paradise Killer

Developer Kaizen Game Works
Publisher Fellow Traveller
Format PC, Switch (tested)
Release Out now

Kaizen Game Works' open-world detective game begins with a death-defying dive onto its sun-kissed island setting. It could hardly be a more appropriate start. *Paradise Killer* is a daring, headlong plunge into a quixotic world, one that will initially leave you floundering and gasping for air. For its opening hour or so it's as dense, confounding and overwhelming as our first visit to Night City, with its strange characters, unfamiliar terminology and arcane rules. And yet it's similarly true to the spirit of cyberpunk: its retro-revivalist aesthetic brings together a diverse collage of influences, just as Barry Topping's fantastic soundtrack marries city pop with jazz fusion, '70s funk and disco. It's almost too much, and yet you'll realise that figuring out the workings of this uncanny universe is as absorbing as the process of solving its central mystery.

Its unwillingness to explain itself not only avoids excessive exposition, but makes narrative sense, since you're cast as a character who already knows the place inside out: Paradise is, after all, on its 24th iteration. Yet moments before the 25th version is set to be activated – surely this one won't result in a violent uprising or the arrival of deadly demons? – all members of the island's ruling council are brutally murdered. A suspect is already in custody, but soon you'll discover there's something a little too neat about all this. As the formerly exiled investigator Lady Love Dies, you're charged with digging deeper, as this multiple homicide soon spirals into a complex conspiracy in which seemingly everyone – from a horny Scottish doctor with robotic arms to a skeletal ex-assassin turned bar owner – seems to be involved to a greater or lesser extent.

"May you reach the moon," they all say as Lady Love Dies takes her leave, though our investigation takes a while to get off the ground. Since you're given carte blanche to proceed however you please – as well as determining when you're ready to take your case to trial – you won't necessarily find out just how crucial each of these characters is to the central plot unless you're extremely thorough. As you explore Paradise, you'll tease out a range of loose threads, between talking to potential suspects (and cross-referencing their statements with others) and some good old-fashioned sleuthing. Love Dies' laptop collects your findings and helpfully arranges them into case files and investigation notes, but it's up to you to chase down any leads, pulling them together and assembling a chronology of events.

There's a lot to consider, in other words, as you criss-cross the island, corroborating and breaking alibis in turn, solving simplistic glyph-based hacking puzzles to unlock doors and uncover hidden evidence. As you manually install the last program you need to access the most secure areas, there's a throwaway line that says a lot about its developer's design philosophy: "Friction is nice. Makes things more meaningful." And there is plenty of friction, not least in the clumsy firstperson platforming you're forced to rely on to obtain items that are squirrelled away in hard-to-reach (and sometimes hard-to-see) places. You'll also need to spend time gathering blood crystals, often tucked away in cupboards and on narrow balconies of apartments up several flights of stairs, to pay for fast travel – not just the journey itself, but to unlock each individual save point you can travel between. And you'll need to keep some spare to pay a goat-headed information broker for extra clues.

> There is a giddy thrill that comes from discovering what could well be the smoking gun

SOMETHING'S AFOOT
We don't do tips, but we'd recommend you locate Paradise's foot baths as soon as possible for upgrades that will make your investigation progress more smoothly. A double-jump is essential for reaching some areas, while the meditation ability lets you close your eyes for a few seconds to reveal collectibles in the vicinity – useful for the latter stages, when you'll be keener to use the fast-travel points. This also highlights the location of Shinji, a multi-limbed demon whose modesty is preserved only by an emoji sticker. He reminds us of a cruder version of *Killer7*'s Iwazaru, providing cryptic clues, background information, non-sequiturs and the odd insult – though it's Suda's *Flower, Sun & Rain* to which the game owes a bigger debt.

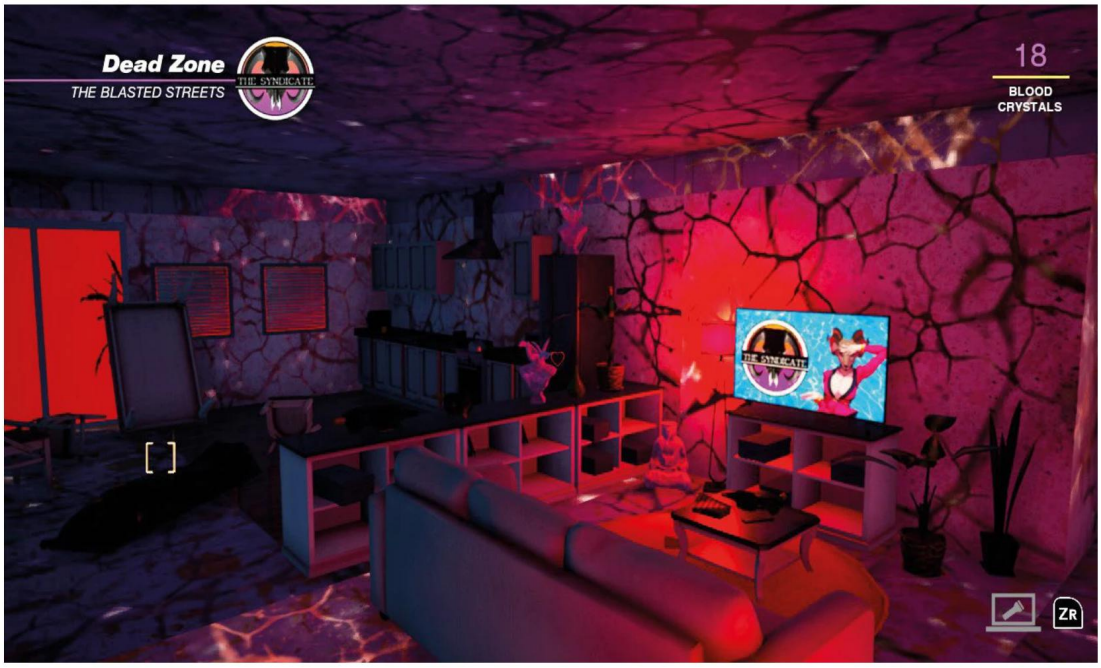
These are choices that make sense, up to a point. The intent is clearly to encourage you to properly scour the place for clues, which you can't do if you're skipping from one shore to another. But Paradise is ultimately a little too large and awkward to navigate on foot, with some clues shoved in deliberately inconvenient places: by the end, we feel as if we've found as much evidence from stumbling across it as actively chasing leads. The in-game map is even more useless than *Hyper Light Drifter*'s. And though we can accept some fuzzy logic as a by-product of Paradise's fantastical milieu, it's possible to spend much of the game accusing characters of wrongdoing and have them still willing to hang out with you, deepening your relationship and leading them to open up – in more ways than one. We know Lady Love Dies is an expert investigator, but this is ridiculous.

Yet just as often *Paradise Killer* verges on the sublime. Though it respects your intelligence more than your time, there is a giddy thrill that comes from discovering what could well be the smoking gun through nothing more than your own hard work. The endgame, too, offers an extraordinarily satisfying payoff. Sure, there's none of the courtroom tennis of *Ace Attorney* – and a half-decent lawyer would shred some of your arguments to ribbons. But what the final trial lacks in 11th-hour revelations it makes up for in an undeniable satisfaction in the methodical way you present evidence, knowing that you've arrived there entirely under your own steam.

There's one final frisson, too, in the way you can present your own version of the truth from the facts you've gathered. Given the penalty for each crime is execution, you can opt to withhold exhibits and statements to effectively exonerate those you feel deserve a less harsh punishment than the key players. At which point, we're beginning to think maybe all this *would* mean less without those frictions. We're still experiencing them even now: while we might be satisfied with our explanation for the council's deaths, one or two loose ends linger, nagging at us even as the credits roll. For all those little frustrations, it's clear *Paradise Killer* is going to stay with us for a while longer. It's a considerable achievement for this tiny studio. Kaizen Game Works: may you continue to reach for the moon.

8

ABOVE Dialogue isn't fully voiced, but shifts in conversational tone are accompanied by short speech samples, voiced by a game amateur cast. Witness To The End has an unplaceable accent that adds to his enigmatic character.
RIGHT The ruins of Paradise's Dead Zone are purposely difficult to navigate, but the place is perhaps a bit too dark for its own good



BELOW At times, Paradise's views live up to the name, but it's simultaneously beautiful and ugly, with areas of grotesque opulence juxtaposed against the Brutalist architecture of the citizens' homes

ABOVE Characters appear as 2D cutouts, likely a pragmatic development choice that nevertheless feels stylistically fitting within the world. It's darkly amusing to see corpses pressed flat against the floor, mind

Pendragon

That one brief shining moment is all but over. Inkle's narrative strategy game paints a bleak picture of Camelot's end, effectively letting you pen its epitaph as you play through the days leading up to Arthur's confrontation with estranged son Mordred. The latter, a self-styled 'man of the people' who seems to be actively making those people's lives significantly worse, has all but torn down the old world. Whether you save Arthur from his fate is ultimately moot; any victory is Pyrrhic at best. Yet the desire to fight on remains. Each playable character, from the determined Guinevere to the drunken Gawain, manages to find a sense of purpose when all seems hopeless. We might be in folkloric territory, but at times *Pendragon* hits terribly close to home.

If your destination never changes, no two journeys to Camlann are ever the same. Each stop on your quest takes the form of a small isometric grid, upon which every step counts, with every turn potentially having major ramifications for how the story plays out. Even your choice of stance – diagonal or linear – is important. The latter lets you claim surrounding territory, but leaves you vulnerable. Ready your weapon, meanwhile, and you can only move in one of the cardinal directions, but at least you're prepared when someone (or something) lunges forward.

You'll usually need to play cagily. When the board is cramped it's often easier to outmanoeuvre your opponents and safely make your exit via the far corner rather than risk taking them on. That's especially true when two or three enemies are shuffling around, ensuring any offensive moves on your part will result in swift retribution. Given that a single hit may bring an end to your journey – just as one incisive thrust of your sword can to theirs – you'll need to think carefully. The same applies to conversation. Advance toward villagers with your sword drawn, and they may respond in kind or retreat in fear; equally, showing noble intent by sheathing your weapon might win over timid locals, or else encourage them to cut you down so they can steal your belongings. Snippets of dialogue and stance changes clue you in to their objectives, though it's not always clear how much your actions are affecting theirs. The tension, all the same, is palpable.

Regardless, you shouldn't have any trouble reaching Camlann on your first attempt: the default Anecdotal difficulty is the lowest possible setting, while until the final battle you're warned of any potentially fatal actions before you commit to them. It's a smart choice, establishing the hostility of this world without punishing the player too harshly, and subtly encouraging repeat plays – since you've more chance of meeting other figures of legend and thus unlocking them as playable characters. It's rare you'll encounter more than one on a single run, though you can bring other

Developer/publisher Inkle Studios
Format PC
Release Out now

Advance toward villagers with your sword drawn, and they may respond in kind or retreat in fear

A KNIGHT'S TALE
Your journey should take around three to five in-game days, which means you'll occasionally need to find a place to rest unless you fancy riding through the night. You'll usually get a morale boost for pausing, and when you've got a companion or two you'll also get the chance to listen to a short story as you gather around a flickering campfire. These fables – the majority of which are user submissions, pithily edited by Inkle – might be tangential to the plot, but while you're given the option to skip them we'd recommend otherwise until you've heard the lot. Many provide some welcome light relief in an otherwise gloomy game, and even here you're given a choice of interjections as the stories unfold.

would-be knights into the fold. New recruits mean more mouths for your meagre rations to feed, but they can also take a hit for you, recovering after the battle with reduced health unless you're forced to leave them behind. Each successful run, meanwhile, gives you the chance to increase the risk, making enemy units cannier and reducing the chance of finding help or supplies.

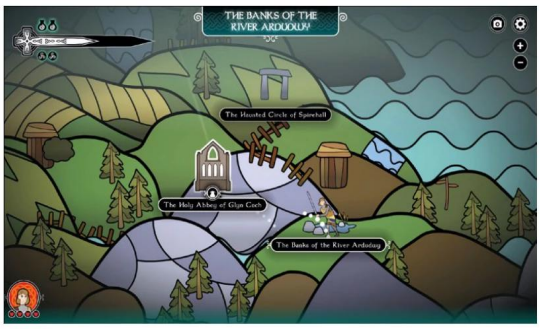
In truth, your choice of protagonist appears to have a bigger impact on the challenges you'll face. Some boards seem all but unwinnable, as Mordred loyalists and aggressive beasts force you onto the back foot. With morale dropping the longer you hold your position, you'll eventually have no choice but to flee. It's telling, for example, that we struggle alone to Arthur's side as the sour-faced Morgana – whose animal-taming witchcraft doesn't help much against human opponents, and whose reputation clearly precedes her. Yet on our next run, at a much higher difficulty, we breeze through as archer Branwen, whose battlefield feats (not to mention her blossoming friendship with two female knights) afford her a range of special moves.

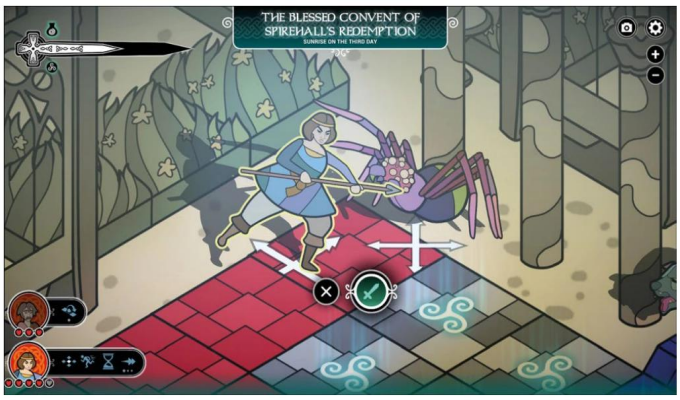
Even so, we're aware that Lady Luck is on our side. These, and other moves accrued after key events, are restricted by a renown meter. And with a profusion of that resource on each grid, and Branwen able to attack any unobstructed unit on the same row, we pick off most enemies from a safe distance.

There are odd inconsistencies elsewhere, too. At times, its rules seem arbitrary or unclear, with legitimate moves sometimes inexplicably unavailable and enemies suddenly slinking away from winning positions. Sometimes we're warned that a move will put us in danger, even when there's no visible threat. Meanwhile, though we appreciate the sheer volume of choices Inkle is keeping track of, at times it loses the plot. Upon finding Lady Rhiannon's castle empty, we visit a nearby marsh in the hope of locating her; when we don't, Branwen twice insists it's crucial she reaches the place she's just left. And despite the granularity of the storytelling, we've grown accustomed to dawns arriving reluctantly, to overgrown ruins and their "musty ropes of cobweb". Tiptoeing across another darkened grid, the surprises come far less frequently.

Even so, as the events change in each account of Camelot's demise, Inkle taps into something vital about the nature of storytelling, how tales are embellished and embroidered, and how their meaning is subtly altered in the process – even when the unhappy ending remains essentially the same. Yes, this might lack some of the playful breadth of *80 Days* and the dizzying ambition of *Heaven's Vault*. But Inkle continues to think harder than most about how its stories are told – and in this case, retold. You'll want to see each and every one of *Pendragon*'s journeys through, even knowing that its survivors are set to live miserably ever after.

7





ABOVE The undulating landscape sometimes makes it unclear which routes will lock out potential destinations – you may hear a rumour of Excalibur's whereabouts, yet taking a detour prevents you from getting there

TOP RIGHT Randomness can significantly affect your enjoyment of a run. At worst, *Pendragon* feels like a poor man's *Banner Saga*; at best it recaptures the nervy, high-stakes suspense of *Into The Breach*.
MAIN From higher ground you can move in any direction without changing stance, the direction you choose determining whether you end that turn in passive or offensive mode.
LEFT Meet a new character late in a run and you probably won't use them, since they often won't have any special skills. It's usually better to stick with your protagonist and their multiple abilities rather than pile another body on the bonfire

I Am Dead

Nosiness is a thoroughly British concept. (And even if it isn't, we're having it anyway, because taking ownership of things that aren't ours is just *what we do*.) There's something distinctly passive-aggressive about it: peering over fences and snooping into affairs, all while maintaining an air of polite nonchalance. It's not *I Am Dead*'s setting – a seagull-filled, rural-accented, North Atlantic island – then, that makes it feel most like a product of **Edge**'s home country. It's its central mechanic: sticking your nose into everyone's (and every*thing*'s) business.

The justification for it is wonderful, too. You are Morris, the deceased curator of Shelmerston's museum; when the spirit of your dog, Sparky, warns you that the volcano on the island is about to erupt, you must set about saving your hometown by finding the five ghosts who represent its prospective new guardians, and convince one of them to take the job to prevent disaster. It's a hidden-object game, essentially: Mementos scattered around the island, mentioned in still-living characters' memories, are the key to summoning the ghost of each Prospect. You find them by using a unique, supernatural but brilliantly logical mechanic: selecting three-dimensional scenes and objects, then using the triggers to zoom in and out, "slicing" into an interior view. Just as if, we eventually realise, a non-corporeal being might pass through walls.

Not only is it all deliciously executed – rotating and slicing is smooth and satisfying, moving around is a joy thanks to a clever camera system, and aligning 'flashback' illustrations in Memories is helped by a telltale rumbling of the controller – but the results are always delightful. Progression is the main goal, of course, as you hunt trinkets related to each character's life and relationships: a Buddha statue, a toy boat, a bottle of whiskey. Some things are easier to find than others (and sometimes our curiosity gets the better of us, spoiling the surprise as we happen across an object before starting its quest, which can disappoint). More often, you'll have to carefully study the clues each Memory provides, and often use a little bit of inference as to where certain things might have ended up – a stone nose being one memorable example.

There are plenty of sidequests to keep you busy, too, although it's more for the satisfaction of ticking something off than moving the story forward. When sniffing out imp-like Grenkins, you're shown odd, but oddly recognisable, perspectives on objects you must then seek out and match up (bottom-up view of a heating coil in a kettle, anyone?). There's a generous amount of autocorrect on lining these up, too – something we wish for more of when it comes to the overly fiddly Memories. Mr Whitstable's challenges are the more diverting aside, though: the bizarre giraffe spirit offers up cryptic clues as to especially unusual finds, such as wizard seagulls and shroomy turbotanks. And the long-necked riddler himself is a riot, played with distinct comedic flair.

Developer Hollow Ponds, Richard Hogg
Publisher Annapurna Interactive
Format PC (tested), Switch
Release October 8

Cut into an armchair and you'll find loose change, as well as a lost remote

TALKING HEADS
When we tell you that Mr Whitstable's voice is distinctive, we're not exaggerating – we immediately recognise it as that of animator David Ferguson, who's created and lent his tones to several brilliant comedic skits in *Dreams*, and who has also previously appeared in another Hollow Ponds game, card-based Roguelike *Loot Rascals*. In fact, the credits read like a who's who of friendly sorts in the British game industry: Philippa Warr, writer of the game featured on the page immediately following these, plays Ornette the Fox, while Matt Lees (who also cut the trailer for *I Am Dead*) has a star turn as the unforgettable Greg Litherland.

But just as often, it's entertaining to simply peep into the colourful ephemera of Shelmerston for sheer inquisitiveness' sake. Hollow Ponds really has thought of, if not everything, then most things: cut into an armchair and you'll find loose change, as well as a lost remote. Bees busy themselves around honeycombs in hives. You can spot every yolk winking at you from inside a barrel of pickled eggs in the local pub, and the writing really does go all the way through the sticks of rock the sweet shop sells as souvenirs. It's weirdly comforting: were we to get psychoanalytical about it, perhaps we might say there's something about a videogame letting you see things for exactly what they are in an era of infuriating obscurity.

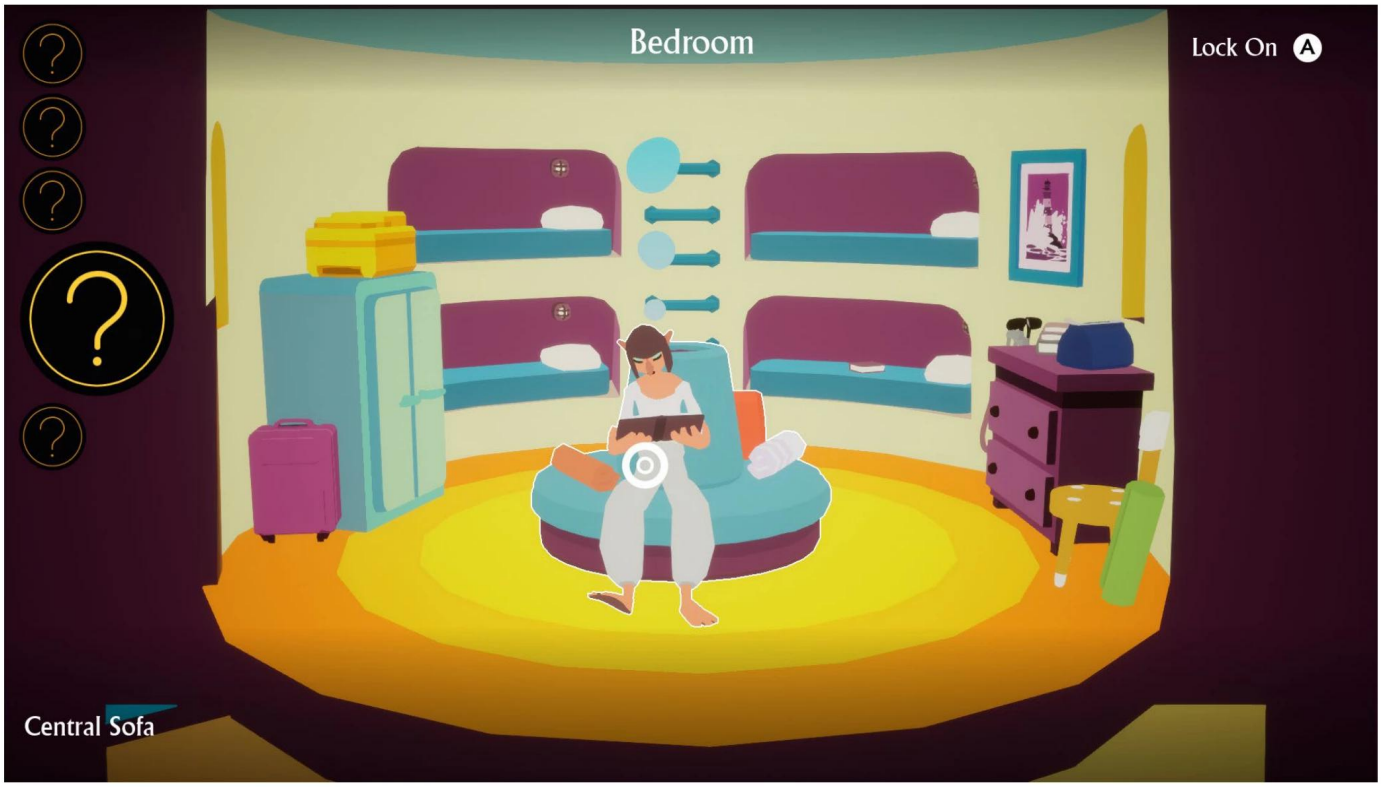
It is a fantastically rich and beautifully realised locale in which to roam, and the tools you're given with which to do so are considerately presented – at first, we lament the fact that hidden Mementos are always in the same "zone" as the people whose memories you're probing, until the trickier finds and larger levels come along and we realise how frustrated we might have become without that wordless boundary-setting. It's a real shame, then, that the narrative packaging around *I Am Dead* is so unconvincing. Morris as a character is likeable enough, although we never really get a chance to get to know him like we do the Prospects. But the overarching script is a letdown. An infodump of a conversation makes for a clumsy introduction, while the story's end has characters frequently lapse into cliche. One particular line is so on-the-nose that we fight the urge to roll our eyes; *I Am Dead*'s message about the impact of seemingly inconsequential little curios, and memories being how the lost live on, is so vividly expressed through the past several hours of playing the game that there's surely a more delicate way of putting it.

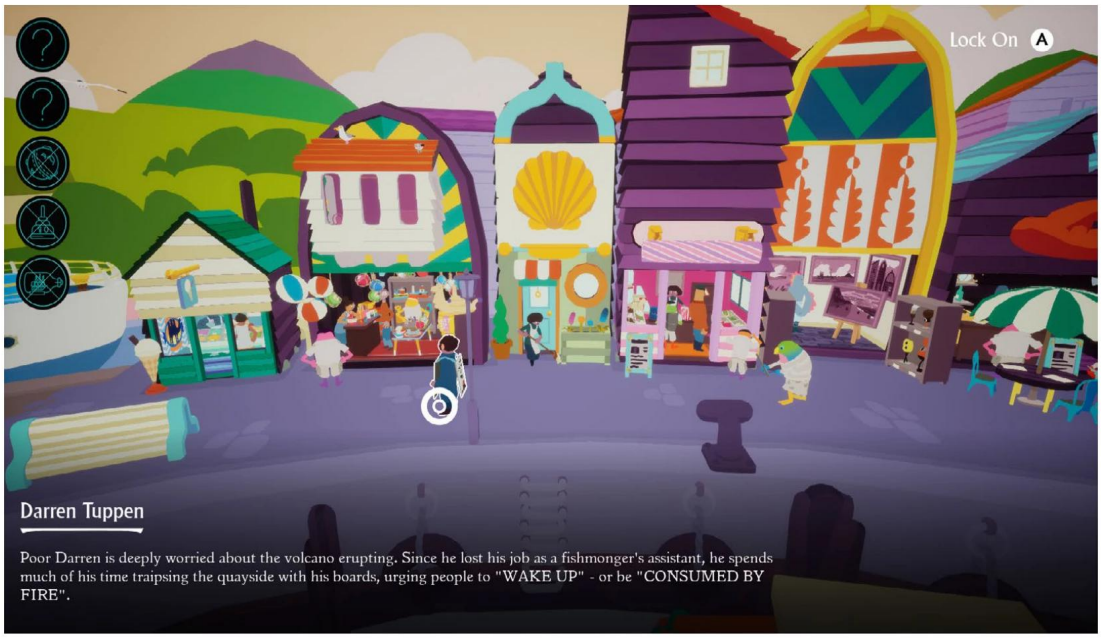
We wish *I Am Dead*'s creators had had the confidence to let the smaller stories speak for the game as a whole, because they're so eloquent. An early mention of an infamous cephalopod comes back to bear in a later level, if you're thorough enough; item descriptions offer punchy jokes, wistful world-building and even plot twists. One strong performance from a Memory-holder with an insatiable penchant for toast nearly has us in tears laughing. And then there's Greg Litherland, a figure of such intriguing depth that a certain item description in the final level breaks our heart all over again.

It's in these smaller, more organically implemented narratives that *I Am Dead*'s message is most apparent. These are the moments in which we realise that perhaps this is not a game about nosiness, but about the intimate joy of familiarity – of really studying, and appreciating, every detail that makes up a town, a person, a life, and how so much can be said and felt (across millennia, even) from so little. In the end, we're rather glad we stuck our beaks in.

7

ABOVE Pictured: one of *I Am Dead*'s many unintentional indie band names. After completing the game, we are gutted to discover there's seemingly no way to return to individual levels to clean up sidequests we left for later





TOP To our surprise, the plummy-voiced Sparky is probably the first dog we're not a huge fan of. She's useful at the end of levels, though, as you bark spirit energy back into the ghostly Prospects.
MAIN The first level is set in the more contained Shelmerston lighthouse. The slight bit of resistance you feel when moving between levels is delectable stuff – we miss it in other scenes.
LEFT The locale often shifts and changes, with characters moving about between areas, which alongside lovely sound design makes Shelmerston feel alive. Even minor characters are great: Darren Tuppen, these days, is what the kids might term a "big mood"

A Monster's Expedition (Through Puzzling Exhibitions)

Assembled with trademark elegance, Alan Hazelden's latest puzzler serves up a generous helping of serene *Sokoban*-style challenges while taking a sideways look at humanity's little peculiarities. A light-hearted museum tour set among a series of archipelagos, it stars the monster from Hazelden's *A Good Snowman Is Hard To Build* – but if the affectionate embraces in that game suggested a gentle giant, it's clear they're no tree-hugger. The conifers here are swiftly uprooted with a sharp shove, becoming logs, which can be rolled or pushed to form a bridge to the next island. With two, you can make a raft; push off from a rock and you'll sail to the next area.

Like any good museum, you'll constantly find yourself distracted. Unexplored islands are shrouded by clouds, and your eye will be drawn by exhibits poking out, encouraging you to find a way there. The wonderful display descriptions, meanwhile, offer extra incentive, playfully imagining how common objects might look through alien eyes. A climbing wall becomes a human storage rack, while a zoetrope, brilliantly, is "the earliest known perfectly looping gif format".

All the while, Hazelden teaches you the finer arts of log rolling with extraordinary subtlety. You'll push one into another to nudge it into position, flip one up onto an exposed stump, and use a longer trunk as a bridge for a smaller log. You learn almost via osmosis – until you approach the end and realise you're using more advanced techniques without really thinking about it. Late on, as the circuitous route to the exit leaves us moderately stumped, we revisit some earlier areas and fairly breeze through a selection of optional challenges. A few others off the beaten track take a little more chewing over, though that's to be expected. Yet while the branching structure is mostly welcome, it's perhaps too easy to stumble into a set of puzzles before you really have the mental tools to beat them. Wander too far from the critical path, meanwhile, and it might take a little while to get back where you really need to be, though red post boxes – their letter slots sucking you up and spitting you back out again – provide a delightfully efficient mode of fast travel.

Besides, who hasn't occasionally got a little lost on a museum trip? Hazelden and writer Philippa Warr give the player ample encouragement to keep going, while composer Eli Rainsberry's delicate soundtrack soothes the anguish of the umpteenth do-over during the most testing bonus challenges. Despite the posthuman setting, these puzzling exhibitions are gently life-affirming, offering warmth and ingenuity in equal abundance.

8

Developer Alan Hazelden
Publisher Draknek & Friends
Format iOS, PC (tested)
Release Out now

CREATURE COMFORTS
The difficulty curve is relatively merciful by Alan Hazelden's standards, though there are still times where we find ourselves pausing for thought. The monster can dangle its feet in the waters around each island, but there are a few dedicated rest spots, too, from a coffee house to a popcorn stand. At one point, we decide to take a load off on a nearby bench, the camera zooming out slowly as Rainsberry's gorgeous piano-led score makes its presence felt.

You can undo as many moves as you like, though often it's quicker to reset an island back to its default state and start again. In some cases, you'll need to do that to reach other places anyway

Moon

They say love doesn't come with an instruction manual, but here the latter is pretty much essential. The early stages of Love-de-Lic's 1997 'anti-RPG' – never previously released outside Japan – are an unwieldy reminder of a game from a different age. Co-director Yoshiro Kimura's Onion Games has supplied a downloadable booklet to guide you through this localised port, but it's still an off-puttingly cumbersome start.

You won't be able to survive an in-game day without at least one meal in you, while sleeping is the only way to recover energy and save your game. Happily, these survival mechanics become far less intrusive. And, as we write 'Don't starve' as a reminder to snack once our hero's shoulders start drooping, we realise that *Moon* isn't just a game of its time; it's often way ahead of it.

Like a stone thrown into a lake, *Moon*'s influence has clearly rippled far beyond its initial impact. Its opening ten minutes are an extremely funny parody of JRPGs, the kind we've seen since but rarely done quite so effectively. As *Majora's Mask* did three years later, it invites you to study NPCs and their routines, paying attention to the day and time while you decipher clues that will help you to help them. Toby Fox's *Undertale* is its most obvious descendant, its creator acknowledging his debt to *Moon*'s premise without having played it before. Certainly, Fox's players will recognise the compassionate tone, humour and strong character focus – although every playthrough of *Moon* is a pacifist run.

Though he shares a directing credit with Kenichi Nishi and Taro Kudo, this has Kimura's fingerprints all over it: there's the same mix of humour, sincerity, weirdness and genuine profundity that have been the hallmarks of his work ever since. Fundamentally, it's about a search for love, whether that be romance, friendship or platonic affection, as you indulge the passions or unearth the most hidden desires of its eccentric cast. Love isn't quite all you need, but it becomes an energising force, its power levelling you up each night, letting you travel farther and stave off tiredness for longer. True, it effectively amounts to a series of fetch quests and arcane puzzles, some of which involve a lot of hanging around to trigger timed events.

Yet while there's no escaping the fact that *Moon* can be a slog at times, that's probably apt. Love *can* be frustrating, exasperating, elusive. *Moon* dares you to wait for love, to seek it out, to open your eyes to where it might hide and hold it close when you find it. As such, assuming its most patience-testing proclivities don't put you off, there's a good chance it'll capture your heart.

7

Developer Love-de-Lic
Publisher Onion Games
Format Switch
Release Out now

FREE SPIRITS
Between quests that range from training an easily distracted dog to watching a royal guard cosplay as a certain iconic rock vocalist, you'll spend some time undoing the brutal deeds of a sociopathic 'hero' with an oversized sword. The corpses of creatures litter each area; approach, and you'll learn more about their habits, and where you might find their wandering souls. Some are more easily captured than others, but each one you retrieve earns you cash and love from a friendly alien.

Tim Rogers' localisation – by turns strange, funny and heartfelt – rarely misses a beat. Delightful touches abound: the two options when you talk to the local baker are "I'll buy!" and "I'll… bye!"

Tell Me Why

We tell stories to make sense of our lives. Twins Tyler and Alyson Ronan know all about this: ever since a traumatic childhood incident ending with the death of their mother, for which Tyler was indicted, things haven't really added up. And so the two reunite in their hometown of Delos Crossing, hoping to piece together the past – we tag along, but struggle to see how things fit together ourselves.

At times, Dontnod's exploration of the line between myth and reality is beautiful. It feels like an elevation of the *Life Is Strange* universe's framework: kid receives a superpower relevant to their struggles, coming-of-age tale ensues. Tyler and Alyson's 'powers,' while presented as supernatural, are grounded in reality. The standout idea is a version of twin telepathy, which lets you check in with your sibling during conversations with others, getting their read on a situation before making choices.

But it's the second, much duller ability that gets most screentime: you wander to whichever spot makes your controller throb most suspiciously, and press a button to summon the ghosts of small-town dramas past. More intriguing is the Rashomon effect (a reference made with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer) demonstrated by Tyler and Alyson's differing memories. Select either twin's version of a fight they saw, or a conversation they had as children, and a symbol indicates whether you've brought the two closer or pushed them apart (although many results feel incongruous with what's transpired). You're encouraged to draw your own conclusions, an idea the more abstract – and enjoyable – puzzle-solving serves, as you translate allegories in the fairytale tome created by the Ronan family to uncover secrets.

Sadly, despite it being the driving concept of the game, Dontnod ends up leaving little room for interpretation. At the close of episode two, we're in no doubt as to what really happened that night down on the dock. Then follows a third chapter, which – with the exception of one captivating, if on-the-nose, sequence of puzzle-based storytelling – feels largely pointless. Enter hackneyed quicktime events, leaden pacing, a pantomime villain and an end choice where only one option makes any kind of sense, as the thriller portion of the tale gets its conclusion at the expense of the thematic core of the game. *Tell Me Why* is another example of Dontnod's strengths – compelling characterisation and rich world-building – butting up against the weaknesses we've seen time and time again, and eventually being usurped by them. The studio cannot seem to reconcile with itself, and in this sense, it's unwittingly proved the point its latest narrative fails to: with so many sides to consider, not all stories are so easily tied up.

5

Developer Dontnod Entertainment
Publisher Xbox Game Studios
Format PC (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

OUT OF THE MARGINS
It's not a focal point of *Tell Me Why* – for long, at least – but Tyler Ronan is a transgender man. In several scenes, the guiding expertise of the many trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming people who contributed to the game can be felt, as his identity is treated with care and respect (even if the trans protagonist in Dreamfeel's *If Found* feels by far and away the more honest character expression). On the other hand, *Tell Me Why*'s clumsy portrayal of mental illness feels like a step back for the studio – perhaps there wasn't room in the budget to fund two sets of consultants.

While Tyler and Alyson's childhood nickname for each other feels like a believably goofy family in-joke, the word is jarring during the serious scenes that Dontnod's writers insist on including it in. Unintended laughs ensue

Star Renegades

Back in **E**344, we suggested we'd be unlikely to skip *Star Renegades*' glorious battle animations. Not quite: we fast-forward them instead. Sure, we relish watching roguish saboteur Nodo Kalthoris roll towards a colossal mech and vanishing briefly, only to appear behind it before spinning one gun and firing the second without looking, leaving it stunned. Yes, the high-quality pixel animation, dynamic lighting, post-processing effects and screen shake combines to create impact and spectacle that trumps turn-based inspiration *Octopath Traveller*. But the game's Roguelike structure combined with its RPG grind means you'll be seeing a lot of the same battles against the same enemies playing out in nigh-identical fashion.

Before it descends into repetition, the setup shows promise. The do-overs have a narrative grounding: a mysterious enemy armada is looking to wipe out our heroes from every possible reality, and you cross the quantum divide after each defeat, hoping to have learned enough to at least postpone the inevitable in the next. If Massive Damage's kitchen-sink approach to combat systems threatens to become overwhelming, it is at least built upon solid foundations. Enemies considerately telegraph their intentions, a timeline displaying their target and when they'll attack. You'll need to disrupt or destroy them before they get the chance, using moves to push them down the line so you can get a critical bonus, or even beyond it to the next turn. Yet these Break attacks have their limits: after a certain number, enemies will dig their heels in and refuse to be budged. Time, then, to defend or deflect.

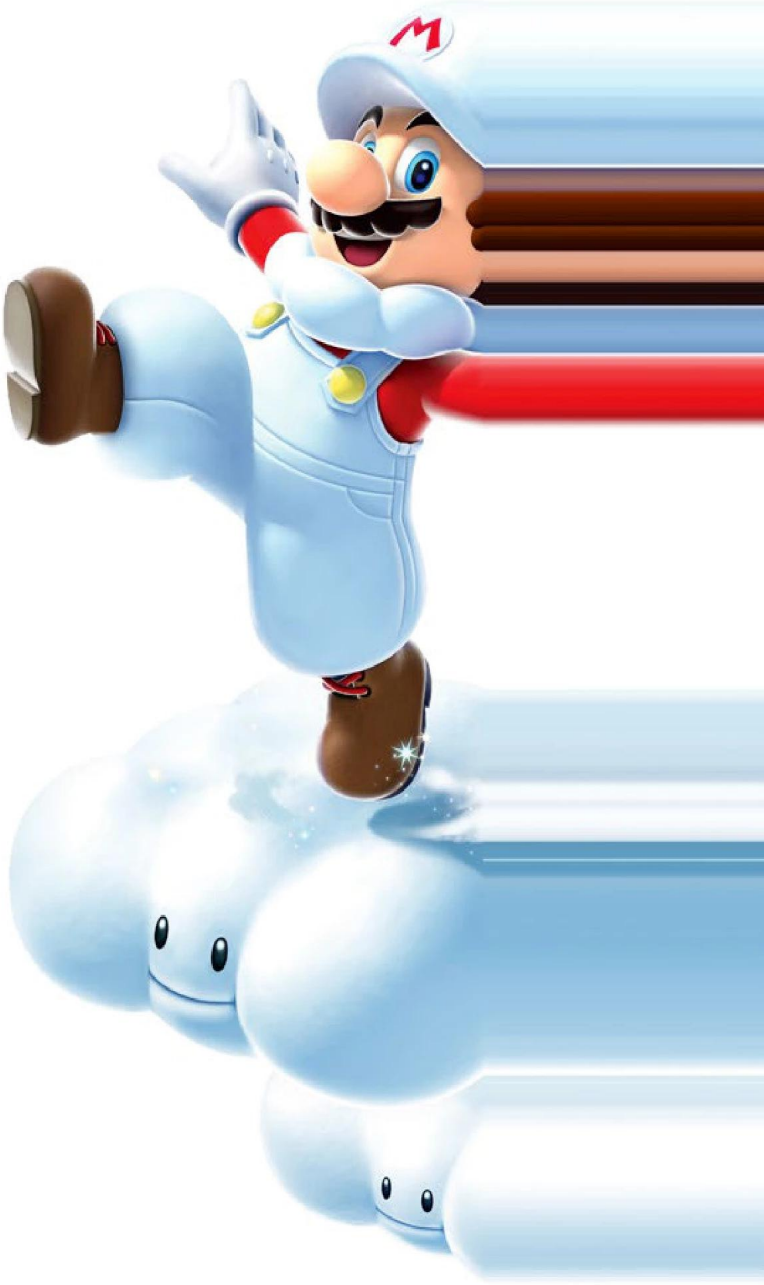
There's plenty more to consider: enemies don't just come with shields and health bars, but armour too, though a Fury meter occasionally lets you pull off special and combo attacks that can cut through it. You'll soon discover it's crucial to keep your shields intact as long as possible, since health and armour can only be replenished outside battle. Outside a single HP chest that tops up your whole party, you only get a chance to heal up every three battles, as your party gathers around a campfire to share single-use cards that offer minor restorative powers or temporary perks. You'll likely limp up to the first boss, but after a few turns your past hour or so of progress is brutally wiped away, with additional class perks, randomly spawning weapons and a newly expendable renegade giving you a marginally better chance on the next run. Your reward? A second pink-tinged planet with more attritional mini-bosses and yet another brick-wall boss. By the third, our patience – even for Kalthoris's nonchalant showboating – has long been exhausted.

5

Developer Massive Damage
Publisher Raw Fury
Format PC (tested), PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now

PROCEDURAL AGGRAVATION
The enemy has a structure that's essentially a diet version of *Shadow Of Mordor*'s Nemesis system, with promotions for triumphant mid-bosses. Each has a range of perks, but when you choose to engage them you won't necessarily know which ones, nor which units will fight alongside them. Some feel especially unfair: at the start of one battle, a backline enemy summons an extra mech while two others attack before we've even had chance to move.

Some units have attacks that stun enemies, but can only be used once per battle. It's a smart choice when an enemy's Break limit has been reached; less so when one of their perks causes a frenzied attack in response



Super Mario Galaxy 2

Why EAD Tokyo's ageless platformer may still be Mario's finest hour

By Chris Schilling

Developer EAD Tokyo **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Wii **Release** 2010

No one working at Nintendo, we're fairly confident, was thinking of Roxette when EAD Tokyo started developing the successor to *Super Mario Galaxy*. But the much-derided Swedish pop duo's greatest hits album Don't Bore Us, Get To The Chorus is an uncanny match for the design ethos of the sequel, a mission statement to which the studio holds fast throughout.

From the very beginning, it's clear it has places to go: we're hurried through the narrative setup, the fanfare that greets our landing at Sky Station Galaxy bursting from our speakers much sooner than that initial touchdown in the Good Egg Galaxy. Yes, Mario's 'faceship' is a more underwhelming hub than Rosalina's comet observatory. But it compensates with the speed at which it whisks us to those vibrant, multi-faceted worlds. If *Super Mario Galaxy 2* seems in a rush at times, that's only because it wants its players to reach the good stuff quicker.

Granted, it can only do that because it's following in the footsteps of a predecessor that made Mario the first plumber in space. But replay *Galaxy* today and its first steps, like those of Neil Armstrong, are understandably tentative. The giant leaps come later. Unlike the original, *Galaxy 2* trusts us to keep pace with its gravitational twists and tricks, confident that it doesn't have to slow down to make sure we're still with it. Instead, it bounds ahead, willing us to catch up – literally so when you complete a galaxy as Luigi and a staff ghost shows you how a level is *really* done.

This acknowledgement of speedrunners, a precursor to *3D World*'s Ghost Miis and *Odyssey*'s time-trial challenges, is just one of dozens of ways *Galaxy 2* plants seedlings that seem to have inspired Nintendo's output over the decade since its release. Cloud Mario lets Nintendo widen those voids, inviting players to fill them with up to three brisk shakes of the Wii Remote – and as we do, it's hard not to draw a line from those player-created platforms to *Super Mario Maker*. The red-blue panels of Flip-Swap Galaxy, as you spin in mid-air to turn them over, were revisited in *3D Land* and *World*. Then there's the tense rhythmic challenge of Beat Block Galaxy, where platforms disappear and reappear in time with the soundtrack: another idea so good it bore repeating in each 3D *Mario* since.

And it's not just Mario's adventures that have drawn inspiration from *Galaxy 2*. Towards the end of the game, amid the helter-skelter rush of ideas, it finds a rare moment of stillness. Having spent almost two games getting away from *Super Mario Sunshine*'s claustrophobic interiors, venturing as far beyond four walls as possible, Slimy Spring Galaxy seems to break all the rules. Here, we find Mario swimming through an underwater cave like a moustachioed Lara Croft, a green shell propelling him through the water. Giant tube worms bend into your path, but the light from the shell is enough to make them retract into the cave walls. Just as his air is about to run out, a launch star lets Mario breathe again, carrying him up and out towards the flagpole at the midway point, a trail of coins marking a precipitous drop to the next aquatic area. This is patrolled by Boos, with boost rings in the walls sending you speeding toward them before a narrow tunnel sends you towards the surface, weaving between spiny urchins.

Then comes the payoff, as you emerge from these gloomy waters to a scene of almost transcendent serenity, Ryo Nagamatsu's score departing to leave nothing but gentle birdsong and the soft rush of a nearby waterfall as you stroll into a field of white flowers. A treasure chest awaits before you, but your eye is drawn to the horizon, as the sun rises at what looks like the edge of the universe. Revisited today, it takes on new significance, with *Breath Of The Wild*'s tranquil exploration still fresh in our minds.

Yet just as often as it points the way forward, *Galaxy 2* looks back, cheekily pilfering concepts from Mario's past before gleefully making them its own. Sometimes it's no more than a brief nod, such as Rolling Coaster Galaxy's rainbow-coloured road. Later, it goes much further, paying homage to Mario's first 3D outing in pitch-perfect fashion with Throwback Galaxy's take on Whomp's Fortress. From the first notes of that instantly recognisable score, ▶

it's like stepping out of a time machine – and even here there's a sneaky switcheroo at the end. But Nintendo goes one further with Tall Trunk Galaxy's giant slide. On this twisting, looping course – faster, harder and deadlier than its 64bit counterparts – Mario remains upright throughout, as if to show how far he's come since then. Skating along with his hands behind his back, he leaves his lower-poly iterations on their collective backside.

Occasionally, it sticks to traditions while toying with scale or gravity. Take Supermassive Galaxy, which, with its colossal stage furniture and enemies, playfully suggests that sometimes bigger really *is* better. Here, a spinning coin isn't collected when you touch it, but rather lets you wall-kick off it to higher ground. Warp pipes are still technically a mode of transport but, rather than descending into them, you stand on their outer rim using them as a lift as they rise upward. Bowser's Gravity Gauntlet, meanwhile, may take place in a castle belonging to Mario's arch-nemesis, but it's one unlike any fortress we've seen before, as you walk up walls and along ceilings, until somehow jumping *up* into an underwater section feels like the most natural thing in the world.

That spirit of reinvention sees EAD Tokyo regularly combining familiar ingredients in thrilling new ways. So, it says, you liked the gravity-flipping 2.5D sections of the previous game? Now what if up changes to down and vice versa on the beat? And if you haven't had enough of rhythmic twists, try Flash Black Galaxy for size. Here, you'll climb up a haunted house from a side-on view before the camera shifts to a more conventional thirdperson perspective, then tackle a 3D platforming gauntlet where the stage is only illuminated for a second – *foom!* – every two bars of Koji Kondo's underground theme.

That old standard is remixed, of course, as is just about everything else. Because when *Super Mario Galaxy 2* isn't seeking new perspectives on old paradigms, it's finding ways to switch up ones it's only just thought up, reinventing itself at every turn. Shiverburn Galaxy's fire-ice combos are particularly ingenious: you'll carefully cloud-hop your way over a lava lake to a switch that freezes the entire surface, before crossing a fiery sea using rocky platforms that scroll by like a semi-abstract, modernist take on *Frogger*. Then it reverses its earlier trick, as Mario glides over ice, dodging lava pools that spread outwards in a perfect circle as fiery rocks fall from above to melt the surface. In Freezy Flake Galaxy, by contrast, you roll snowballs to create paths so Mario doesn't burn his feet.

This torrent of ideas never stops; if *Galaxy* is a kid rummaging around in a chest for new things to play with, its sequel flings open the lid and tips it upside down,

In *Galaxy 2*, you unlock Prankster Comets with a Comet Medal, which often require skilful play to reach

YOU WALK ON WALLS UNTIL JUMPING *UP* INTO AN UNDERWATER SECTION FEELS THE MOST NATURAL THING IN THE WORLD

You're not meant to linger, but it's hard to resist hanging around for Mahito Yokota's gorgeous World 3 theme

GRATE EXPECTATIONS

***Galaxy 2*'s cup runneth over with invention, but it's reasonable to call its story an afterthought. Following *Sunshine*, it's no surprise that Shigeru Miyamoto suggested *Mario* games didn't need a strong narrative focus, yet director Yoshiaki Koizumi squeezed Rosalina's storybook into the first game anyway, lending it a melancholic undercurrent while giving the player extra incentive to beat Bowser. In *Galaxy 2*, you're motivated by the desire to see what's next. It's an approach that pays off thanks to the effort to trump the original for visual as well as mechanical variety. In Boo Moon Galaxy, a flat planetoid becomes a pop-up book, while the Flipsville Galaxy presents an abstract vision of suburbia.**

The sequel's selection of bosses trumps the original's, too: Gobblegut here is particularly challenging in his fiery late-game form, while Bowser Jr twice comes close to stealing his father's thunder

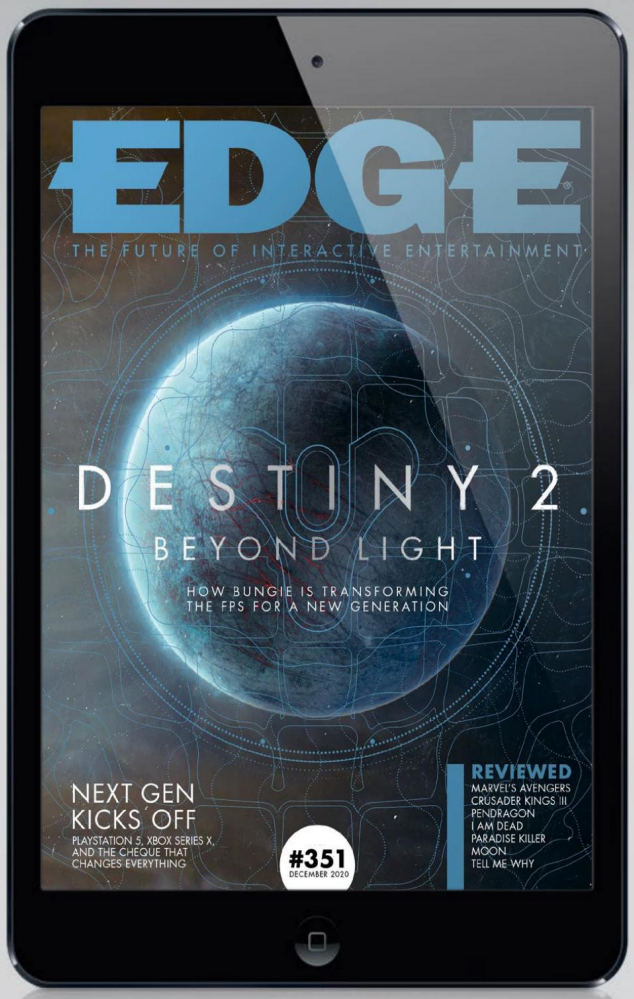
spilling every last toy out across the floor. There's barely a wasted metre of real estate, with secrets stuffed into hidden nooks and teleporters placed on rare empty spaces, spiriting you away to tackle quick-fire challenges against the clock to earn more coins, star bits and 1-Ups. Its powerups are better, too: Rock Mario's runaway boulder bowls over skittle-shaped enemies and rolls down narrow walkways on a one-off level that could quite easily be a *Super Monkey Ball* course.

The Spin Drill allows for more puzzle-focused sequences, as you shake the Wii Remote to power through dirt, bouncing off walls and tunnelling through planetoids. Doing that in Cosmic Cove Galaxy releases the water contained inside its core, letting you swim around in it; a delightful moment that's matched in the same stage when you turn it into a translucent ice rink and wall-jump between a pair of frozen waterfalls leading to the Power Star.

Some of its most transformative items aren't even reserved for Mario: Yoshi has rarely been used more effectively than here. When he's not gobbling fruit to become a blimp or gulping a hot pepper that fires him up ramps and loops like a surrogate Sonic, he's using his tongue to uproot Piranha Plants, or dragging platforms out of walls, or latching onto floating flowers like a grappling hook. Using the Wii Remote's pointer and motion controls makes it more tactile than its predecessor: not just a better *Mario* game, but a better Wii game, too.

Even so, we sense that *Galaxy 2* is less fondly remembered than most Mario adventures; perhaps the inevitable result of the first game's cosmic impact, which made it a much harder act to follow than the original's divisive predecessor. It's also true that it works its most powerful magic in the moment. In pushing you through more challenging and complex arrangements of platforms, enemies, shifts of perspective and gravity; in forcing you to play on instinct; in pummelling you so relentlessly with new concepts, perhaps it doesn't give your brain the time and space to process it all. Still, it's undoubtedly worth rejoining the joyride to be dazzled anew. As Nintendo reaches Mario's 35th anniversary, it feels like the game that rang in his 25th may have been the ultimate Mario celebration, a greatest hits collection with his most irresistible choruses. ■

Cloudy Court Galaxy's celebratory score – it's *Galaxy 2*'s Gusty Garden – invites you to join in, with drums to leap on and a giant hi-hat to ground-pound



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

Rocket League

Developer/publisher Psyonix **Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2015

There's perhaps no greater indignity in gaming than *Rocket League*'s simple button prompt: "What A Save!" Sure, being on the wrong side of a Perfect KO in *Street Fighter* may sting, but at least Ryu and co have the good grace not to bang on about it. Make a mistake in *Rocket League* and you can expect to see your screen overflow with sarcastic taunts.

Yet it's a testament to the longevity of the concept of this excellent sports racer mash-up that those messages don't frustrate for long – thank goodness, as Psyonix is opening up *Rocket League* by making it free-to-play. It's a shrewd move, allowing the San Diego developer an opportunity to rebuild momentum as the current generation slowly begins to fade behind the bright lights and haptic feedback of the next one. And, while it's yet to be confirmed, the move to PS5 and Xbox Series X could give a whole new generation of players a chance to discover its rhythms.

After all, what made those early days so inviting was a community that was making sense of this engaging concept as it went along. But while those days might be long gone, there's still something to be said for falling back into the game's grooves; the galvanizing sensation of gliding through the air and feeling the thud of a successful shot or hitting the perfect angle to just shape a pass towards the goal and, let's be honest, quoting Partridge as the ball hits the back of the net.

Psyonix is using this shift to implement wide-ranging changes to the game's structure. Tournaments will receive a greater focus, allowing more committed players to take part in esport-esque bracketed competitions no matter their rank, and this should allow the more competitive (read: horrid) players a place away from fresh faces who aren't get emotionally numb to the onslaughts of "What A Save!" It's another smart idea, building a natural progression path for the players who fancy more than just a quick knockabout.

Off the pitch, though, this move to a free-to-play model has really been in the works since its debut on PS Plus. For years, *Rocket League* has put its focus on a number of different ways for players to unlock cosmetics, from a Rocket Pass to the introduction of Blueprints at the end of 2019, and all have been served up with unnecessary complexity. Considering the game's on-field simplicity is one of the strongest in multiplayer gaming, the off-field convolution is one lesson we wish it didn't learn from the Premier League.

And yet, much like those messages you invariably see fill your screen, in the end it doesn't matter. As soon as you're back on the field, *Rocket League*'s action feels just as relevant as it did in 2015. With a thin next-gen launch lineup and a new structure that caters to fresh, veteran and lapsed fans alike, it also might have found the perfect time to reintroduce itself. ■

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GAMES OF THE GENERATION