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HYPER LIGHT BREAKER

REWRITING THE RULES OF ROGUELIKES IN AN INFINITE OPEN WORLD

HUMANITY

REVIVING THE ORIGINAL SPIRIT OF PIONEERING PLAYSTATION GAMES

#384
JUNE 2023

PLUS

INSIDE NETFLIX'S GAME AMBITIONS
VIEWFINDER
TIME EXTEND: FINAL FANTASY XV
DIABLO IV

Sometimes it's just fine to make it up as you go along

It doesn't feel so long ago that the open-world videogame was such a rare beast that sighting a new one felt kind of magical. The DNA of these exotic specimens seemed to be familiar only to a select group who'd unlocked parts of our gaming hardware that lay agonisingly beyond the reach of mere mortal engineers. Eventually, though, others caught up. Which isn't to say that such an approach was ever a magic bullet, and indeed we've seen plenty of examples over the years whose ideas would've struggled to fill a waste-paper bin, let alone the acres they were given to play with. As a concept, though, it does at least feel somewhat mature nowadays – to the extent that even modest indie teams, not only 600-employee-strong triple-A studios, can join in and shake things up.

On the cover of this issue we talk about *Hyper Light Breaker* 'rewriting the rules of Roguelikes' in adopting an open-world ethos, but this phrase is really just shorthand to describe developer Heart Machine's willingness to come at the genre from a new direction. In reality, one of the truly great things about videogames as a whole is that their rules are not at all static – because games are still young, and their physiology is being defined, modified and rebuilt as they go along, just as the technology behind them drives so much change by moving so much more quickly than innovation in other fields. Consider it: what other form of artistic expression can hold a candle to the creativity and experimentation we've seen in indie game development over the past ten years or so? As the Marvelisation of the big-budget videogame production feels more difficult to resist with each month that passes, so the efforts of studios such as Heart Machine may resonate even more. Our cover story begins on p54.

Finally, for another excursion outside of rote mainstream fare, consider *Humanity*, whose spirit harkens back to the heady days of cult Japanese PlayStation favourites such as *Q: Intelligent Qube* and *Katamari Damacy*. Director Yugo Nakamura and his cohorts at Enhance tell all on p80.

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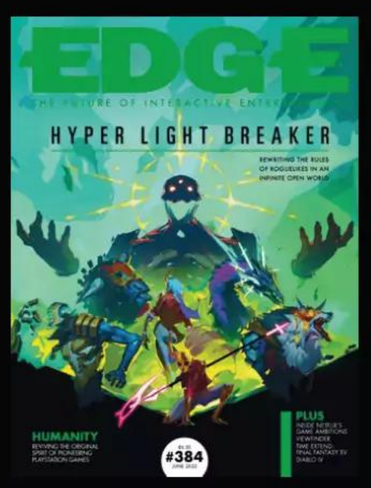

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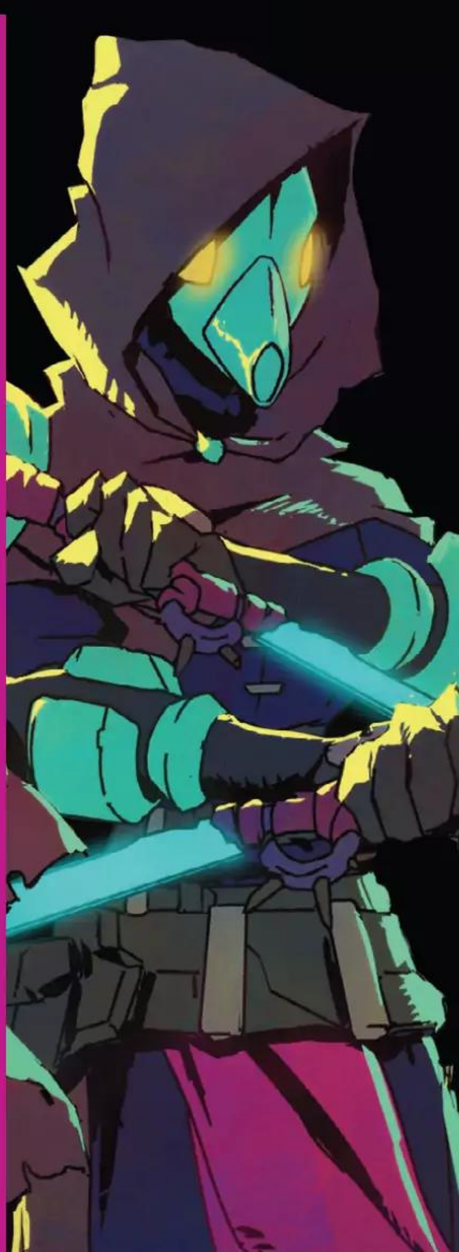

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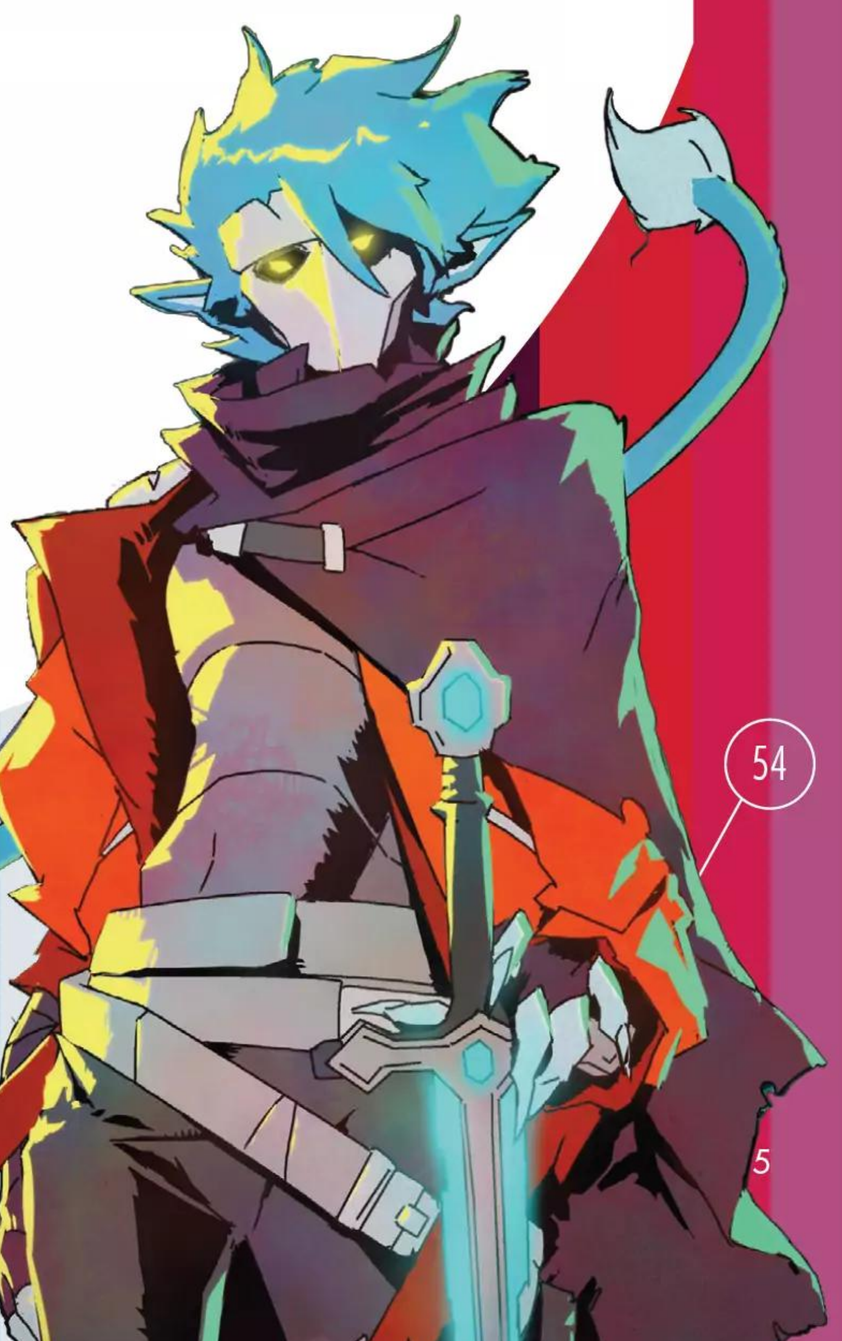

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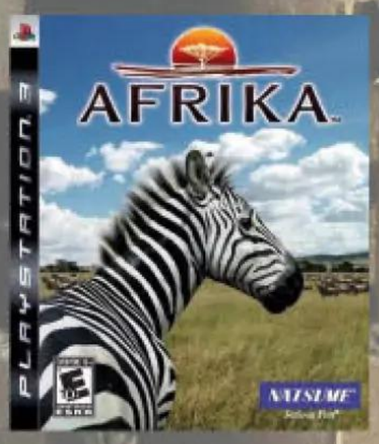

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Epic vision

What does **Fortnite Creative 2.0** mean for Epic's plans of a metaversal future?

Epic Games arrived at the 2023 Game Developers Conference with a clear goal, using its keynote presentation to lift the lid on some of the company's biggest projects, with an ambitious overhaul to *Fortnite*'s Creative mode front and centre. Creative 2.0 places the unrestrained power of Unreal Engine in anyone's hands, Epic CEO Tim Sweeney says, and puts the metaverse in reach for *Fortnite* and the broader videogame industry.

After spending some time with Unreal Editor For Fortnite, at least part of that claim feels true. The PC-based software is an expansive tool, with potential that's unlikely to be fully realised for months or even years to come – though that's thanks in part to a limited set of launch tutorials that narrows its target audience. The second claim is more complex and, ironically, seems to point to a future without *Fortnite* at its centre, and a metaverse with Epic-branded walls surrounding it.

> Tim Sweeney says it puts the metaverse in reach for Fortnite and the broader game industry

Users with no coding background should not ignore the editor's 'your first hour' tutorial when getting started. It's hardly exhaustive, but it does cover the basics of how it works and what you should do to achieve at least a semi-functioning result. Right now, some of the more complicated, yet still essential, factors – such as the intricacies of meshes and how to use Epic's programming language, Verse – are in need of their own tutorials presented in a similarly easy-to-digest manner. Epic offers some resources on its product page, but the editor's most promising features are currently directed more towards professional developers, or at least those with a reasonably firm grounding in programming.

Once you have half an idea of what you're doing, though, the actual process is endearingly simple. Though you can create and script your own models and animations, most users will probably use the generous library of prefab options. In our initial dabbling, we start with a basic lake template, quickly transforming it into a rocky island with wavy cliffs, secret coves, and rugged terrain that melts into smooth, grassy plains. It's a satisfying process, even if in the end we don't yet have an idea what to *do* with what we've made – something we share with plenty of other users at the time of writing.

In these early days of 2.0, the most impressive creations unsurprisingly come from Epic's internal teams: the kinds of rotating sci-fi corridors, lush rainforests and colossal mecha and dragons teased in the editor's debut trailer. Most user creations, meanwhile, haven't yet ventured too far from the kinds of structure and style you'd expect to find in Creative's previous iteration. Once again, more extensive tutorials feel appropriate. Being dropped in a ▶

Escape-room sequence The Space Inside is a sample provided by Epic to show the sort of results that can be achieved using Unreal Editor For Fortnite

WHERE NOW?
Creative 2.0's arrival fell just 24 hours before Build A Rocket Boy revealed specifics on E383 cover game *Everywhere*, which has its own mission to put creative tools in players' hands. In our interview with BARB chief Leslie Benzies, he resisted 'metaverse' as a descriptor for the project, but it's hard to deny that its combination of social hub and creative tool puts it in a similar space to where *Fortnite* is increasingly headed. Ironically, *Everywhere*'s best hope of differentiating itself might be that it is actually *closer* to the traditional notion of a metaverse – a consistent virtual world that users can truly live in – than what Epic seems to be aiming towards.

sandbox and told to do whatever you want with a set of arcane tools you've never seen before will be overwhelming for many users, and Epic hasn't yet tailored it all to a general audience.

The larger point here is how Fortnite Creative 2.0 will figure into a new age for *Fortnite*'s metaverse, as Epic envisions. Over the past couple of years, hardly a month has gone by without a new entrant proclaiming the arrival of the metaverse – not just a new vision for this ambiguous virtual world, but *the* vision for it. Epic CEO Tim Sweeney, of course, has been riding this train for longer than most, as a proponent for the metaverse since at least the mid-2010s. Of late, though, Epic has avoided using the term, possibly in an attempt to distance itself from the word's association with NFTs and cryptocurrency, two things that reportedly don't suit Epic's model currently (unless you count the NFT games that, unlike Steam, the company is happy to host on its PC storefront).

The problem is that, like so many others, Epic still doesn't seem to be able to offer a clear picture of what a metaverse actually *is*. It remains a nebulous concept in general, and each of these new visions has arrived with its own definition. But it's generally agreed to mean a virtual space where users can replicate real-life actions, such as shopping, socialising, or carrying out work or education tasks. Following the Unreal keynote, Sweeney threw in a few more qualifiers to that definition (most of which, unsurprisingly, favour Epic's own positioning). MMOs don't count, for example, despite letting users operate and socialise in a virtual place. *Fortnite* was the first true metaverse experience, Sweeney argues, because it became a social hub and was available on multiple platforms. This kind of gatekeeping is surprising, coming as it does from someone who professes commitment to open platforms, and its narrow view of what constitutes a metaverse ignores other efforts in the field (see 'Where now?').

Deserted: Domination is another Epic-engineered demonstration of what consumers should be able to make with the requisite skill and determination. Expect a *lot* of shooting among the initial wave of user creations

There's also a good argument that *Fortnite* itself isn't really an example of the metaverse, any more than any other videogame with online multiplayer elements represents the ideal. Rather, *Fortnite* is a multiverse: a place where Leon S Kennedy and Master Chief can team up to snipe a walking banana, and where in-game events can become canon in DC comics, and where Dwayne Johnson can play a vital role – as himself – in *Fortnite* lore.

As an evolution of that approach, Creative 2.0 does not simply transform *Fortnite* into a metaverse – but it is a key brick in the road that may eventually lead to *Epic's* metaverse. And it's when looking ahead to the future of all this that things get murkier. The plan, according to Sweeney, is founded on networks of servers owned and operated by Epic, rules and standards set by Epic, with Verse as the platform's universal language, and, most importantly, partnerships with publishers and creators who want to access *Fortnite*'s audience. In this world, Epic's platform would play host to countless entertainment options from professional and amateur creators alike, including games that Epic itself would never create and, indeed, assets that Epic won't have to create – because someone else already did.

> The plan is founded on servers owned by Epic, with rules and standards set by Epic

Sweeney has brought up Metcalfe's Law on multiple occasions since his GDC presentation, referencing the idea that a communication platform's value is multiplied based on the number of people who use it. In other words, the more people use a platform, the more invaluable it is. It's worth asking, though, to *whom*.

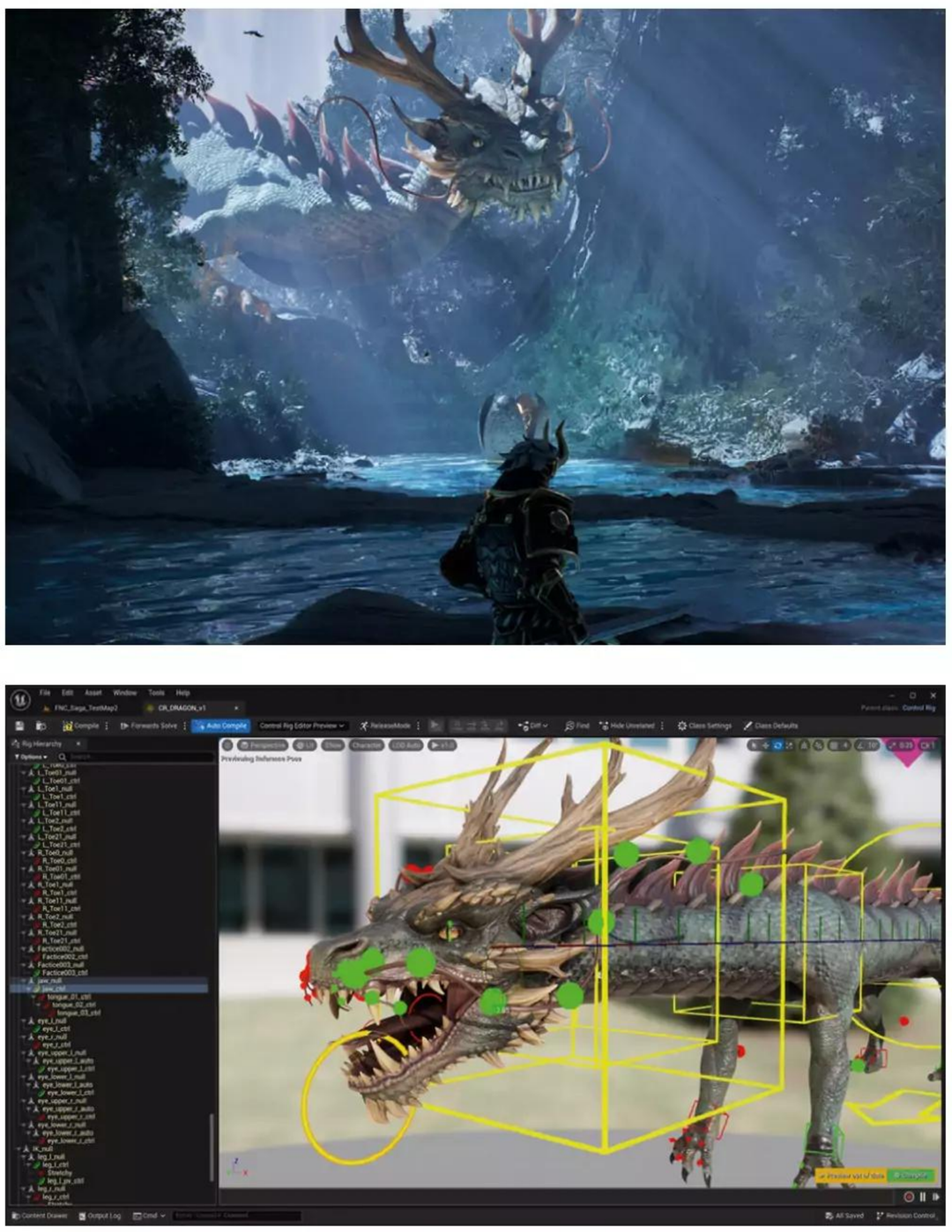
Epic is, ultimately, a multibillion-dollar business that needs to find new ways to increase growth without spending millions on the kind of high-profile licensing deals that power its current multiverse. The hope is surely to keep users within its platform, where they might spend money in one of Epic's various storefronts, whether that's the Unreal marketplace, the *Fortnite* item shop or whatever else might be waiting in the wings; and to present an attractive incentive for ever-bigger clients to use Epic's tools for their own metaverse creations, Metcalfe's Law meaning it makes more sense to make

The Space Inside features only limited interactions, and it's a little clunky, but it's a fine proof of concept

use of this indispensable universal platform than to create your own.

Would this be an environment where everyone wins? That's a little hard to square with Sweeney's ongoing feud with Apple and Google and their walled gardens – ecosystems where one group controls access to the platform and exercises strict control over its uses. However loose the rules and practices governing Epic's metaverse may be, and despite the relatively laissez-faire approach to content created using its tools (see 'Creative licence'), it's a challenge to see the difference between this vision and the app store owners the company professes to dislike so much.

As for what all this has to do with *Fortnite* as a game? Well, that's sort of the point. It remains to be seen exactly how much of a role *Fortnite* plays in Epic's vision for the future. For the immediate term, the scope of this update seems likely to attract at least some creators away from *Roblox* and *Rec Room*, even as it doesn't offer wannabe designers the easiest of on-ramps. Looking beyond that, though, Creative 2.0's main purpose is seemingly as a springboard for expansion into an ecosystem where Epic – and its own metaverse vision – is the last one standing. ■



Epic's Forest Guardian level is the most visually rich illustration of Creative 2.0's power at launch, giving players a sword with which to fend off a pack of wolves and culminating with an enormous, intricately detailed dragon. Though Unreal Editor For Fortnite is only available for PC users, the levels made with the tool run on any platform that hosts the main game

CREATIVE LICENCE

Who owns content made with Epic's tools?

With this launch, Unreal Editor For Fortnite allows you to take assets that you (hopefully) own, migrate them to the engine, and do whatever you want with them, alongside a range of *Fortnite*-specific building blocks, plus anything else you care to purchase from the Unreal marketplace. This works in the opposite direction too, with Epic's remarkably generous user licence granting you the freedom to take your creation off the platform and use it however you see fit – assuming that it doesn't involve certain assets of which Epic retains ownership. It's an obvious advantage over the entirely self-contained *Roblox*.

Catalog shopping

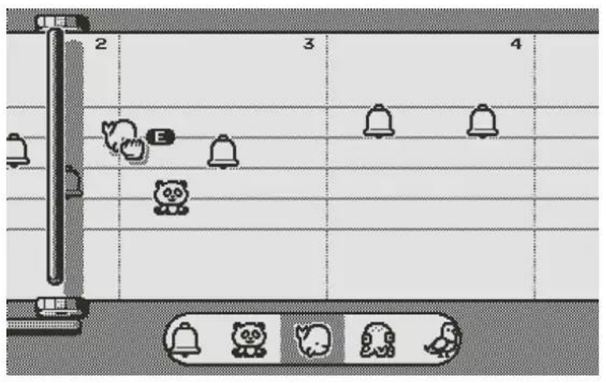
Sifting through the highlights of Panic's **new Playdate storefront**

More than six months since the conclusion of its first season of games, Panic's Playdate has its own store – and, as ever, it's not doing things quite like any of its PC or console counterparts. Until now, creators seeking to release their game on the hardware have been able to distribute them elsewhere, such as via Itch.io, Shopify and Gumroad, with users sideloading them onto their hardware. And many will still have to resort to that strategy, since Panic's Catalog offers a "tightly curated" selection of games, individually hand-picked by staff.

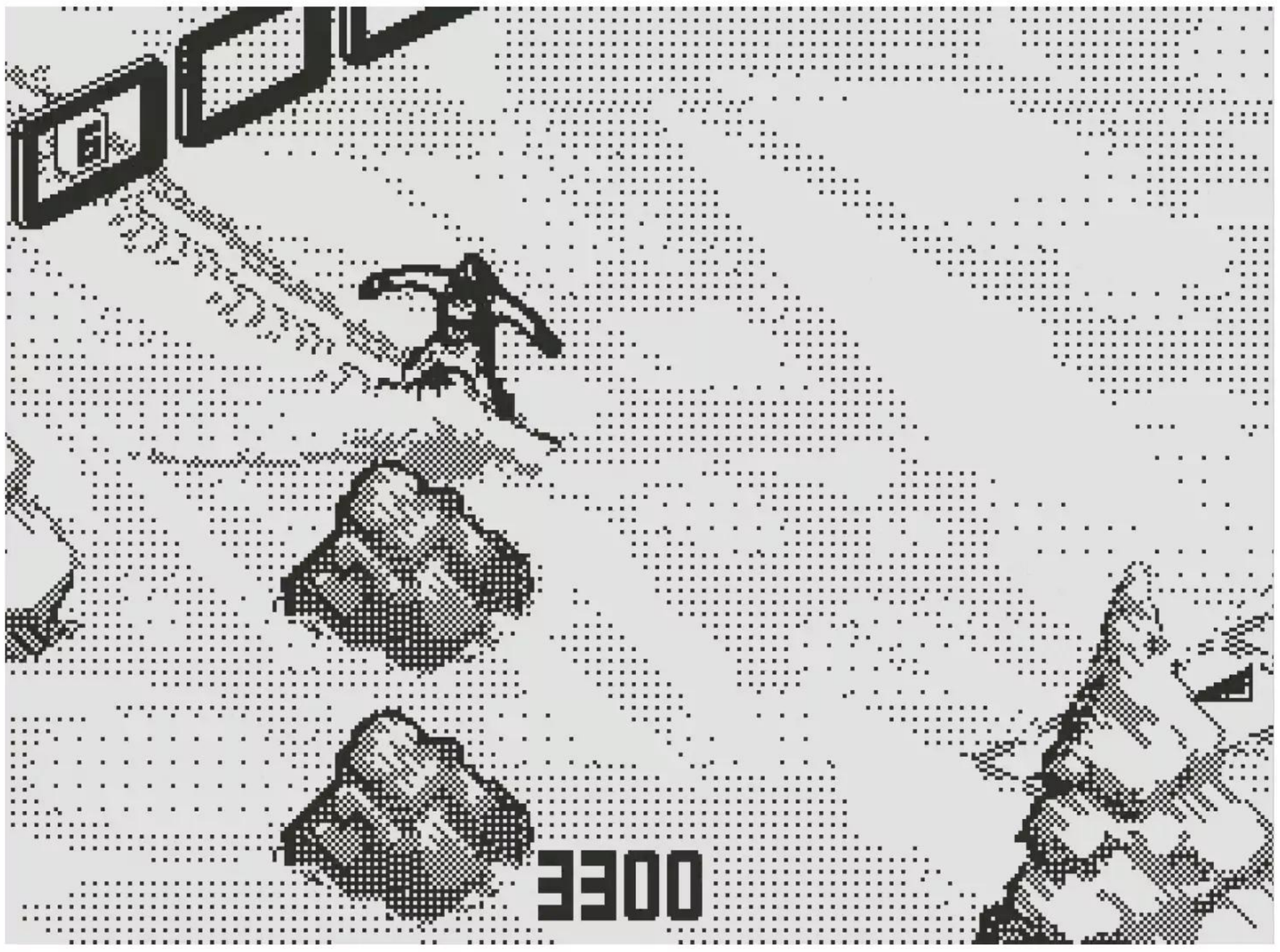
> Think of it as Nintendo's seal of quality, back when that wasn't slapped on any old Wii shovelware

"It's a boutique, not a warehouse," Panic says – think of it as the equivalent of Nintendo's seal of quality, back when that wasn't slapped on any old Wii shovelware, though we wonder how it must feel for those whose creations aren't deemed worthy of a place on these digital shelves. Either way, that doesn't prevent anyone from making their game available elsewhere, while even those selected for inclusion are not exclusive to Catalog; they can be sold on other storefronts. Developers get to keep 75 per cent of sales revenue minus credit-card processing fees, while Panic will let developers know if they think their prices have been set too low; it will also supply a Web page for each selected title, while handling distribution and returns.

At launch, Catalog boasts 16 games, a few of which we've already played, such as Kamibox's deliciously maddening *A Joke That's Worth $0.99* (which now costs an extra cent, but comes with a bonus gag whose delivery is interrupted by corpsing from the teller) and charming realtime flower-shop sim *Bloom*. Among the rest are mildly confounding tower-defence game *Down The Oubliette*, Chuhai Labs' sluggish snowboarder *Carve Jr*, straightforward match-three puzzler *Swap Machina*, and the excellent, surprising creative tool *Playmaker* – not a game but, per Panic's house rules, Catalog selections don't have to be. Meanwhile, freebies *Real Steel* and *Recommendation Dog* allow you to test out the store's crank-to-buy feature without having to spend a penny. The remaining eight? The **Edge** verdict on those is just over there on the facing page. ■



RIGHT **From music making to sound editing and dance choreography, *Playmaker* reminds us of *Mario Paint* and *Electroplankton*.** BELOW RIGHT ***Recommendation Dog* by Sweet Baby Inc has you picking out the right candidate to fulfil the requirements of a succession of demanding recruiters.** MAIN ***Carve Jr* is cut from similar cloth to Chuhai Labs' season-one title *Whitewater Wipeout*, combining crank and button controls as you try to pull off trick combos**

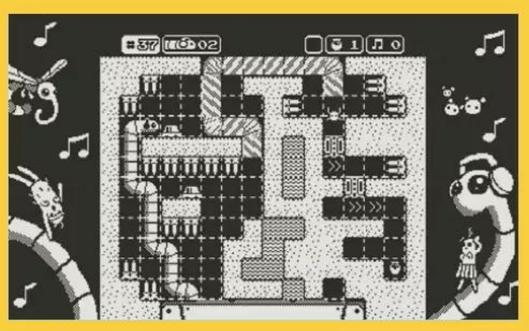


Word Trip

Three from the top and one from the bottom? The rules of Shaun Inman's word puzzler sound a lot like the maths round in Countdown. *Word Trip* is just as gently taxing, as you journey from one four-letter word to another, taking a trio of letters from the first and a single one from the second to form a path between them. As you dally, your fuel depletes, but rushing into the simplest solution might lead you down a dead end; meanwhile, you can hold B and A to check the map and refuel up to three times, your tally of pit stops increasing after every eighth completed word. A modest yet moreish diversion.

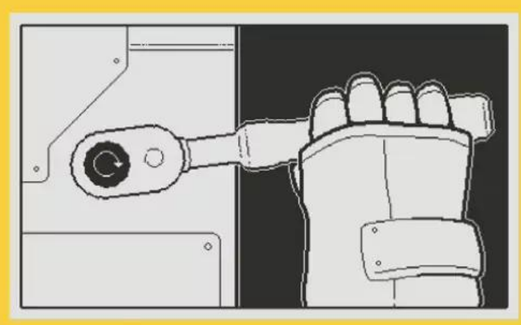
Hidey Spot

From Panic's own Neven Mrgan (creator of mobile gems *Blackbar* and *Grayout*), this compact adventure is a robust showcase for Playdate's all-in-one creation tool, Pulp. As in Mrgan's previous work, there's plenty tucked away beneath the surface, as your task to locate six Christmas presents spirals into a more elaborate quest. It packs plenty of character into its pixel art, as you use whoopee cushions to amuse stuffy monarchs and don thick socks to negotiate lava. To give away more would spoil *Hidey Spot*'s surprises – we'll hold off from doing so, even as the game encourages you to do the same.



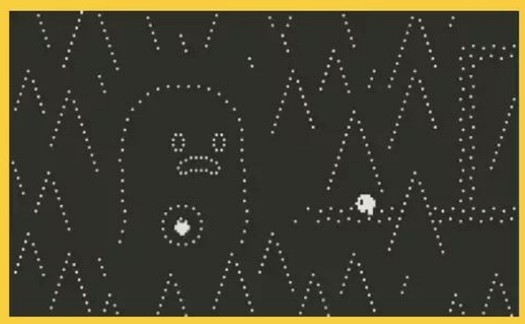
Tapeworm Disco Puzzle

Were it not also available on PC, we'd be tempted to say that this is the kind of game for which Playdate was made. This single-screen grid-based puzzler plays out almost like a turn-based *Snake*: collecting cassettes allows you to extend the body of the titular annelid as you manoeuvre it around tightly designed stages, passing through wormholes, avoiding enemies and collecting musical notes. Your torso can act as a bounce pad to lift jumping fleas to new heights or as a bridge to guide scuttling bugs to the exit, all set to a soundtrack that's more earworm than tapeworm.



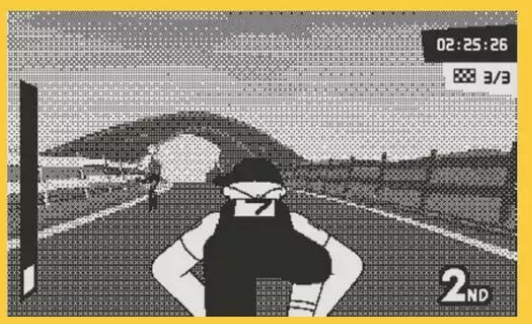
The Botanist

Less a game, more an interactive comic book, this is a remarkable piece of visual storytelling in which you wind the crank to advance the narrative. Parallax effects add depth to each panel, while a string of simple interactions allow you to inhabit the role of space plant scientist, as your interstellar mission gradually goes awry. Whether you're cranking to tighten screws, tapping A to solder wires, or tilting your Playdate to go on a brief space walk, you feel actively involved in this wordless sci-fi tale. It might not last long (around 20 minutes), but this brisk voyage to the stars isn't soon forgotten.



Eyeland

Any monochromatic pixel-art action adventure is going to put us in mind of *Minit*, but as *Eyeland*'s gently surreal journey progresses, we're reminded that *Link's Awakening* remains one of the most influential *Zelda* games of all. This dreamy, compact adventure casts you into a world of piscine hint-givers and spectral baristas, transforming by turns into a multi-floor side-on puzzle platformer and an *Undertale*-esque metaphysical fable, in which you're repeatedly urged to 'give up'. It's cut from a similar cloth to *Hidey Spot*, but both games are worth the hour or so it takes to play through them.



Grand Tour Legends

Featuring the most hypnotic posterior movement this side of *Bayonetta*, this cycling game is all about crank-based meter management. Choosing from a trio of wannabe yellow-jersey wearers, you wind Playdate's analogue lever to accelerate, with your rider turning automatically. The trick to a top-three finish is to balance speed and stamina, letting yourself freewheel down slopes to regain your strength so you can pedal faster when the incline steepens. It's one of the prettier Playdate games, and surprisingly challenging: crossing the line first demands you internalise the ups and downs of each course.

Skew

Given you play as a drone, this spin-off from *The Last Worker* (p104) is technically more endless floater than endless runner – though to describe it thus would be to suggest it's something unpleasant that can't be flushed. Far from it: this is an engaging, purposely unwieldy score-chaser in which you wind the crank to gain height and tilt to steer down hazard-filled vents, before descending into the screen, rotating to dodge debris. It loops over and over, getting faster and more perilous until you've crashed three times. Hello, too, to Jason Isaacs, surely the biggest star to lend his voice to a Playdate game.

Direct Drive

Styled like a silent movie, this feels like a *WarioWare: Twisted* minigame writ large, as you hand-crank a Victrola to match the vocal cadence of a series of 1920s crooners. You'll need to overwind to get the record started, before keeping the needle within a narrow space to gain points as the song plays, with only a brief window to reset if tempo shifts cause you to rush or drag. To complicate matters, your producer will issue a series of demands: tap B or A to quickly hand him bourbon and burgers to boost your score. Unique and beautifully presented, it's perhaps the pick of the Catalog so far.

Pet project

AR, procedural generation and creature comforts coalesce in Niantic's Peridot

From the original Tamagotchi to Neopets and *Nintendogs*, there's a long history of people forming emotional connections with pets that only exist on a screen. It's not hard to see the appeal: all the belly rubs, nuzzles and sense of being needed you get from a doe-eyed animal companion, with none of its messier realities. So when Niantic, having racked up over a billion downloads with *Pokémon Go*, looks to repeat the trick, it's worth paying attention.

Releasing on May 9 for iOS and Android, *Peridot* puts an AR spin on the Tamagotchi formula, allowing you to hatch, raise, and care for a digital 'Peridot' – or 'Dot' for short. You can eventually look after a few at once, but initially you're presented with a choice of three eggs for your first Dot. Each blends procedural generation with handmade assets, plucked from a pool of physical and behavioural traits, known as 'archetypes', that are drawn from both real and mythical creatures.

Peridot director of production **Ziah Fogel** was previously lead technical director for Pixar. She knows a thing or two, then, about animated creatures that pull on the heartstrings. Fogel explains how you raise the Dot from a baby to an adult, through feeding and playing and all the things you'd expect from a virtual pet: "You can walk with it, you can play fetch, you can teach it tricks – all those kinds of things will fuel its attention meter, and ultimately that is how you grow your creature." Unlike the rather unforgiving lifecycle of a Tamagotchi, your Peridot won't digitally perish if left alone for too long, either.

The key difference, though, comes courtesy of Niantic's Lightship platform. "*Peridot* is inspired by the original Tamagotchi, but taking it further, with all of the AR technology we have to create creatures that actually feel real," Fogel says. An early prototype with a creature "able to avoid obstacles in AR" led to the finished product, where the tech reads your immediate surroundings to ensure the Dot reacts appropriately. It will respond differently to beaches, forests, water and patches of dirt – rummaging in the soil to dig up vegetables, or dipping into the ocean – with the behaviour also informed by its own traits and preferences. It will even interact with other Dots, facilitating meetings and new communities as players bond over their digital pets. The idea is to make it feel like you have a real companion – Fogel cites Niantic employees getting "so involved" with their Dots that "they stop and open the door for their pet before they walk through, that sort of thing. So it really does make you feel like it's in the environment and understands the environment."

Fogel cites Niantic employees getting "so involved" with their Dots that they "stop and open the door for their pet"

For **Kellee Santiago**, co-founder of *Journey* developer Thatgamecompany and head of production at Niantic's Game Studios in LA, *Peridot*'s appeal is in the emotional experience given to the player as caregiver and explorer. "*Peridot* is meant to bring a new sense of whimsy and delight into the player's everyday experience," she says, "using that as motivation to look at the world around you a little bit differently, as well as motivate you to connect with your friends and with strangers in different ways."

PLAY HARD

For all Santiago's talk of whimsy, it's clear that play is a serious business at Niantic. She cites the work of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, who conceived of play as foundational to both human and animal learning – the way that play-fighting among dogs helps them learn to socialise and navigate conflict. "We use play in order to train ourselves [and] teach ourselves ways of relating to each other," she says. "It allows us a space to play at relating to each other, maybe in different ways than we're used to. Potentially better ways."

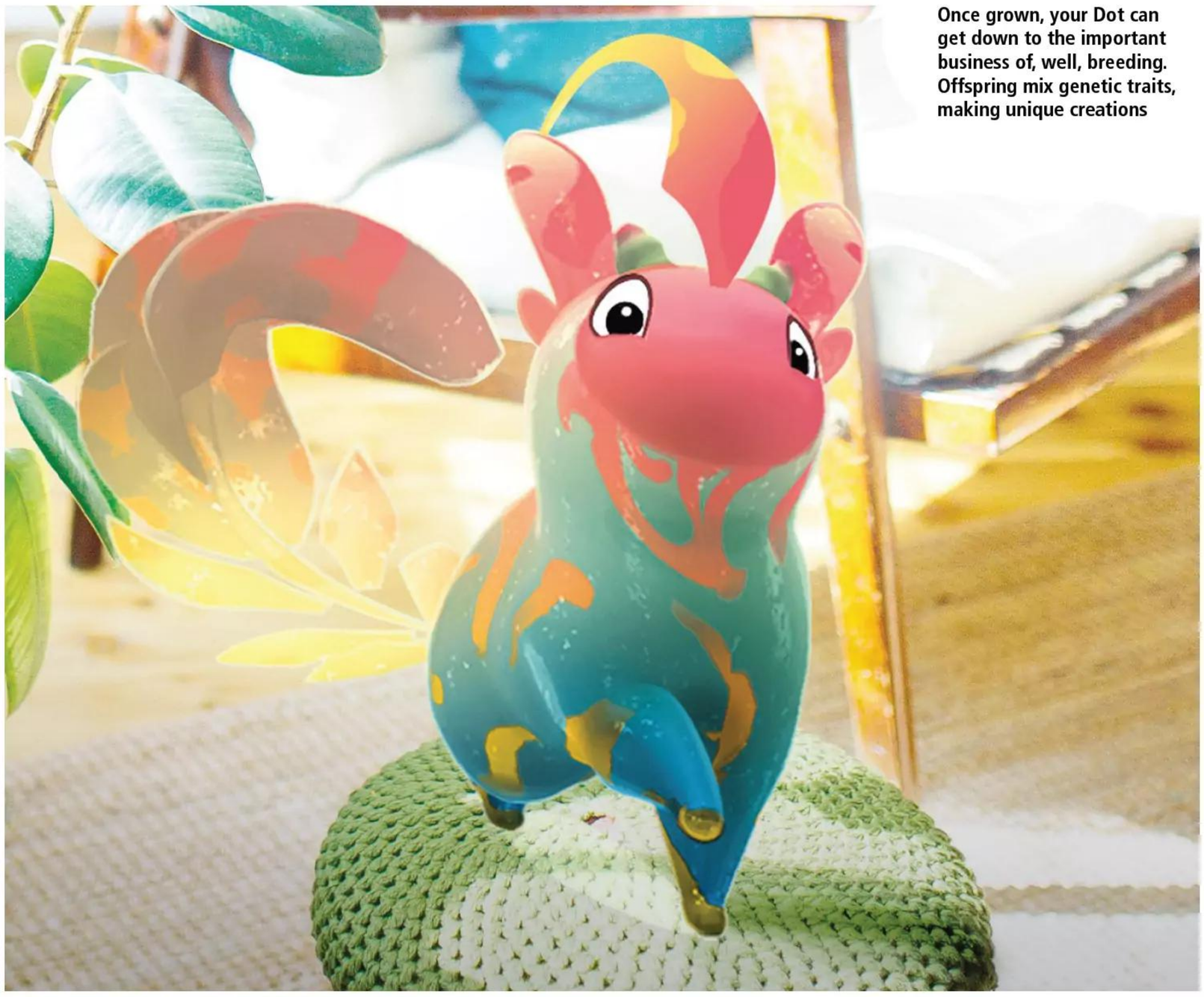
Niantic production director Ziah Fogel and production head Kellee Santiago

The similarities to Niantic's previous hit are inescapable. Both are, after all, social AR games centred on beloved digital critters, and the hatching, growing and breeding of them. (In *Peridot*, breeding two creatures will result in a new pet that combines qualities of both. "We expect people will try to get very unique, interesting looks," Fogel says.) But Niantic knows the risks of making another game in that mould: 2019's *Wizards Unite*, which applied the *Go* format to *Harry Potter*, shut down in November 2021, and it has canned similar projects at various points in development.

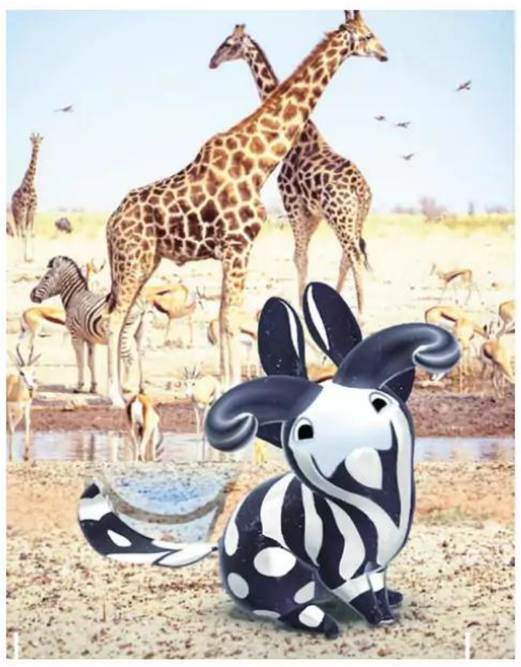
Santiago is understandably firm, then, on the point that this isn't just *Pokémon Go* 2.0. "There is this superficial way in which I think some of the verbs are similar," she says. "But the interactive experience of playing the game is very different. The exploration is really led by the Peridots, who want to see the world, and have desires around, say, seeing a tree or finding something related to water. It's not that they're this creature in your pocket, which is a very different gameplay experience." If *Pokémon Go* is akin to bird watching or bug catching, then *Peridot* is more like dog walking, where your digital pet is just as involved in the act of exploration as you are.

It remains to be seen whether *Peridot* can match the heights of its predecessor – or indeed, of the virtual-pet games after which it is modelled. But Niantic is preparing for success with a post-launch roadmap of updates, and whatever happens, it seems thoroughly committed to what you might call its pet technology. "AR is a thread that will continue far into the future of games," Santiago says. "But it's also on us to create these experiences, to show how they can bring delight into people's lives *now*." ■

Your Dot doesn't wait around – you can expect it to explore, look for certain terrain, and tell you what it needs for a fulfilling day. A walk here, evidently



Once grown, your Dot can get down to the important business of, well, breeding. Offspring mix genetic traits, making unique creations



Archetypes are based on both real and mythical animals. While this Dot (above left) may have certain zebra-like characteristics, another could as easily look like a unicorn, griffin or chimera

FREE RANGE

Dot breeding is Niantic's golden egg

While *Peridot* is initially free to download, and Niantic says there'll be no cost associated with hatching and raising your Dot, there are of course monetisation hooks in place. "There's a little bit of two games in one," Fogel says of the way *Peridot* is structured. "The nurturing loop and playing with your Dot, feeding your Dot, going outside for walks – this is a free-to-play game. If you want to opt into diversifying the species – that hatching loop – that's going to be more of a premium experience." The goal, clearly, is to make players feel engaged enough to want a deeper kind of involvement with these critters' lives.

Repeat pleasure

Jon Ingold on **replayable stories**, Inkle's new game, and not making Overboard 2

Whether adapting Jules Verne in *80 Days* or Steve Jackson gamebooks in *Sorcery*, tasking you with unearthing the secrets of lost alien civilisations in *Heaven's Vault* or getting away with murder in *Overboard*, British studio Inkle has always known how to spin an engaging yarn. So the promise of Inkle co-founder **Jon Ingold** presenting a manifesto for videogame narrative, as he'll be doing in his keynote speech at this year's Develop: Brighton, naturally catches our attention.

"Only one conference is ever going to be foolish enough to let me do a keynote speech," Ingold laughs, when we ask about the m-word. "So I might as well do a manifesto once in my life." It's focused on a less-discussed throughline of Inkle's games, he says: "trying to make narratives that you can replay, in a kind of *honest* way". With Ingold still very much in the process of writing his talk, our conversation wanders far and wide. These, as you might imagine, are just a few highlights from our discussion.

Videogames have always been designed for repeat play, but your contention here is that very few actually reward it narratively. Can you explain that distinction?

So, a couple of years ago, everybody made a time-loop game, right? Because that's the way you make a game to be replayed and replayed. But you're not really replaying the [same] narrative each time – it's one continuous story. *Hades* is a linear story that happens to reuse the same geography and the same characters. And that's smart – it's a great way of using your assets – but it's not replayable in the sense that a good book can be reread, or a good film rewatched. There are very few games – particularly in their narrative elements – where you play it again and get more out of it than you did the first time. The industry thinks about DLC, about content and updates and more, more, more – it's this sausage machine. And that's fine, but I don't really want to write for a sausage machine myself. So it's interesting to me: what is it that's holding games back from having the kind of replayability that a good film, easily, has? And in the cases where we *have* managed to achieve something like that, how have we done it?

> "What is it that's holding games back from having the kind of replayability that a good film has?"

And this is, presumably, a topic that's been on your mind with what you're currently making at Inkle.

It's super-relevant to *Highland*, which is a game that hopefully will very much have this [structure of] you play it once, you get a story; you play it again, you get a completely different story that somehow makes more sense of what you saw. And we're working on this other project which I can't talk about yet, annoyingly, but will probably be in the talk, because it should be out by then.

We'll come back to that, but can you explain how *A Highland Song* is designed to encourage replaying?

The broad structure of the world is a classic diamond shape. It goes off in two different directions, and then eventually they come back together at the end. That's the same structure as *80 Days*, really, and very much in the spirit of its route planning, where you're guided by what you find and notice and are interested by, and the accidents that happen along the way. It should be a balance between 'I've got this map and I want to go *there*' and also 'I fell off this mountainside, so I seem to be over *here* now'. The intention is that if you play it once and enjoy your journey, then that's fine, but if you go back and start again, then you keep the inventory that you picked up, the maps, the shortcuts that you unlocked. It's a *Death Stranding* sort of thing, I suppose, where your next journey through the world is significantly changed by your first.

Jon Ingold will be giving his keynote at this year's Develop conference, taking place in Brighton on July 11–13. Edge readers can get a ten per cent discount on tickets with promo code YKBKYS

STEEP CLIMB
Ingold admits that *A Highland Song*'s blend of *Zelda*-ish outdoor adventuring, rhythm-action platforming and Scottish folklore presented a narrative challenge. "I started from a position of 'I don't think I know how to write for this'," he says – but after years of work, he's happy with the results. "What we're aiming for is that, as you explore the world, the world triggers thoughts and memories in the protagonist. It's not quite *Immortality*, but it's in that sort of direction. You throw something into the world and you get something back, but there's something going on [behind the scenes] that's helping the story cohere, hopefully."

***A Highland Song*'s development gave birth to *Overboard* as a smaller side project. Is this other project like that?**

It's weird – after *Overboard* came out, and everyone enjoyed it, I immediately started work on a sequel, got halfway through it, and it just totally died. And I don't know why. Maybe I was burned out or recovering from COVID and lockdowns and life, which was stressful at the time. Or it didn't quite have the same magic or something. I don't know. I still keep meaning to go back to it and finish it. And if I do… on paper, it's a very quick-and-dirty project, right? Because we have the code already, you can just plug the story in, and it works. But it didn't come together. And somehow we've ended up somewhere else completely. With this other project that we're working on, which we're doing for an external partner, it's quite a weird design in many ways – it's a particular challenge and a particular constraint, which makes for a game that's in some ways quite quick and dirty. But in other ways it's horrendously complicated. I think, once we've finished these two things, which happen to be almost landing on exactly the same day, we'll take a break and maybe do something tiny. I'm not sure what we'll do after that. But I wouldn't be surprised if there's a bit more of a quick-and-dirty project in our future. ■

A Highland Song has a novel narrative solution to the problem of death, Ingold says. "Throw yourself off a cliff and you'll see what I mean"

Phonopolis has been developed by a new team at Amanita, led by former college classmates Petr Filipovi, Eva Marková and Oto Dostál. Dostál hopes the world "retains some of the warmth of human touch"

DRAWING CARD

Five years since our first glimpse of its corrugated world, a second look at Amanita Design's ambitious adventure

It was back in **E**326 that we first clapped eyes on *Phonopolis* – or at least the cardboard pieces from which it has been constructed at Amanita's cosy Prague HQ. Even by the studio's assiduous standards for world-building, it has taken time to come together – tellingly, when it was unveiled last May, Amanita was at pains to point out that it didn't expect the game to launch within the next year. As such, it's no surprise when our tentative request for a playable build is politely declined. We could, though, have an exclusive new screen – well, who would possibly turn that down?

Beyond the punctilious process behind its assembly (its environments and characters are designed on computer, printed onto cardboard, hand-painted and distressed before being scanned back in), the long wait can be attributed to the fact that this marks a series of firsts for Amanita. It's the studio's first 3D game, for starters, its first political game (though its authoritarian dystopia will be handled with typical levity), and the first whose story will be told in a comprehensible language. Still no release date, alas, but after five years, we're prepared to hang on a little longer. ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

Getty Images/Tom Dulat (FIFA)

"The new FIFA game – the *FIFA 25, 26, 27* and so on – will always be **the best egame for any girl or boy**. We will have news on this very soon."

With the EA partnership over, FIFA boss **Gianni Infantino** can't wait to crack the world of computerised videosport egames by himself

"**It's created a monster**. The money people are asking for, and the valuations… it's been bananas."

Hiro Capital's **Spike Laurie** reflects on the deluge of cash flooding into the game industry

"This is obviously disappointing… but **we will not allow Sony's behaviour to affect our long-term relationship**."

You attempted to block the Acti/Microsoft deal. **Bobby Kotick** will remember that

"Imagine if, immediately after Drive, Nicolas Winding Refn had made **a near-three-hour adaptation of a 1990s Neo Geo beat-'em-up**."

It's a bit long for the poster, so **Robbie Collin**'s John Wick 4 summary will have to make do with being immortalised here

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

Game Enter The Gungeon: House Of The Gundead
Manufacturer Griffin Aerotech, Dodge Roll, Devolver Digital

Originally planned for release in 2020, this lightgun-based spin-off from Dodge Roll's beloved Roguelike shooter has been refined to take account of fan feedback following its various appearances on the convention circuit. Now the cabinet is finally ready to roll, with a $5,500 (plus shipping) price tag that sits in some contrast with its indie roots. On top of a decent-quality 43" display and 2.1 audio system, the investment delivers more considerable hardware innovation in its Sinden lightguns. The UK company's hardware offers proven reliability with LCD displays, but *House Of The Gundead*'s two unique pistols also feature variable haptic feedback, so that the game's lineup of 40+ weapons have their own feel in operation. No doubt handguns feel quite different from rocket launchers, although we're intrigued about the nuances of everything in between.

NINTENDO SWITCH

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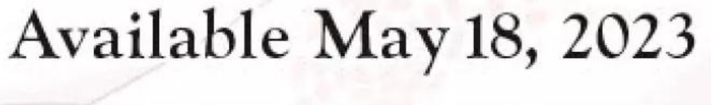
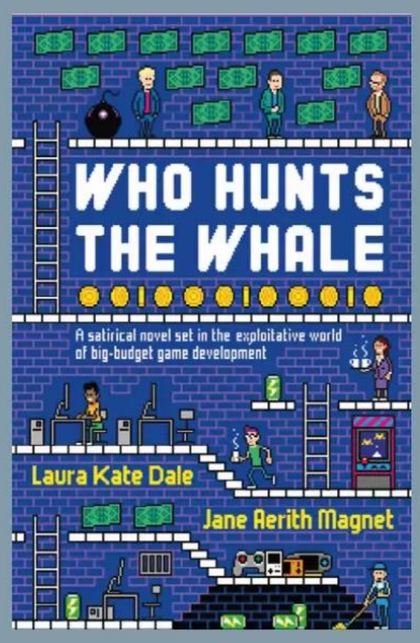


KNOWLEDGE THIS MONTH



BOOK

Who Hunts The Whale
bit.ly/dalewhale
This briskly paced epistolary satire from former standup comedian Jane Aerith Magnet and videogame critic Laura Kate Dale follows Avery Paige, whose dream job at a triple-A developer-publisher steadily becomes a nightmare. Across a series of diary entries she tracks her experiences in the Supremacy Software boardroom and with the exhausted workers outside its doors, as the authors tackle a range of themes such as crunch, sexual harassment and release-now-patch-later culture. There are moments that carry the tang of bitter experience – if Dale and Magnet don't have firsthand insight, they've clearly spoken to people who have – and though its characterisation is occasionally thin, the boorish behaviour of the executives (down to their insistence that Supremacy is a 'family') rings uncomfortably true.

VIDEO

Leon And The Mysterious Village
bit.ly/resitoon
The underlying joke of these Capcom-commissioned anime shorts is a simple one: *Resident Evil 4*'s Chainsaw Men and tentacle-waving Colmillos except cutesy, with rainbows spurting out of heads instead of blood. Yet with each episode clocking in at under a minute, there's not enough time for it to wear thin, and the involvement of Nippon Animation, lovingly aping the style of its own World Masterpiece Theater series, lends a touch of genuine class to proceedings. After three episodes, we're ready to declare this the best *Resi* adaptation, easy.

DREAM

A Long Climb Ago
bit.ly/longclimbago
Developed by a small team within Media Molecule, this diverting physics-based platform-puzzler presents you with a series of challenges in which you must build a route to the exit via blocks of different shapes and sizes. As they fall from the ceiling you can rotate them to form steps and bridges, freeze them in mid-air – hopping on and off before releasing them once you've safely negotiated a hazard – or transform them into 'potion bombs' to destroy obstructions. Bonus objectives complicate matters, asking you to beat the clock or use fewer than the maximum number of blocks, while collecting floating Whisps unlocks more challenging tests. With pieces dropping in random order, you're often forced to adapt on the fly, lending a sense of spontaneity to go with the unpredictability of the physics.

THIS MONTH ON EDGE

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

VENUE

Platform Canary Wharf
bit.ly/platformcanary
With its Shoreditch bar having become something of a fixture for London game media events of late, Platform's expansion to a second venue should provide some welcome variety. We can vouch for the quality of its cocktails, having done a full run of the menu at one aforementioned event – Wake Up Samurai is surprisingly tasty for a drink featuring Buckfast, the caffeinated tonic wine, though it's liable to leave you in a state akin to the one in which its gaming inspiration launched. Bookable booths, meanwhile, offer diversions of a slightly more wholesome nature, courtesy of well-stocked PS4s and Switches, whose libraries range from *Fall Guys* to *Towerfall*.

continue

Shu-in
BAFTA Games recognises SIE veteran Shuhei Yoshida with its 2023 Fellowship award

I'll buy it
Resident Evil 4 (the non-anime version) breaks three million sales in just two days…

Diversion ahead
2022 highlight *Roadwarden* gets an unexpected followup in visual novel *Windy Meadow*

Think of the children
Australia considers mature rating for all lootbox games, while *Roblox* opts to hide in-game ads from under-13s

quit

Minus 3
After months of publishers pulling out, US trade body ESA officially cancels E3

At a high price
…while PSVR2 sales fail to hit 300,000 in the launch month, according to IDC estimates

Smash and grab
MultiVersus was never actually *out*, WB reveals – and will now be offline until 2024

War zone
EA shuts down three *Battlefield* games, including *Bad Company 2*. At least *Mirror's Edge* avoids the chop

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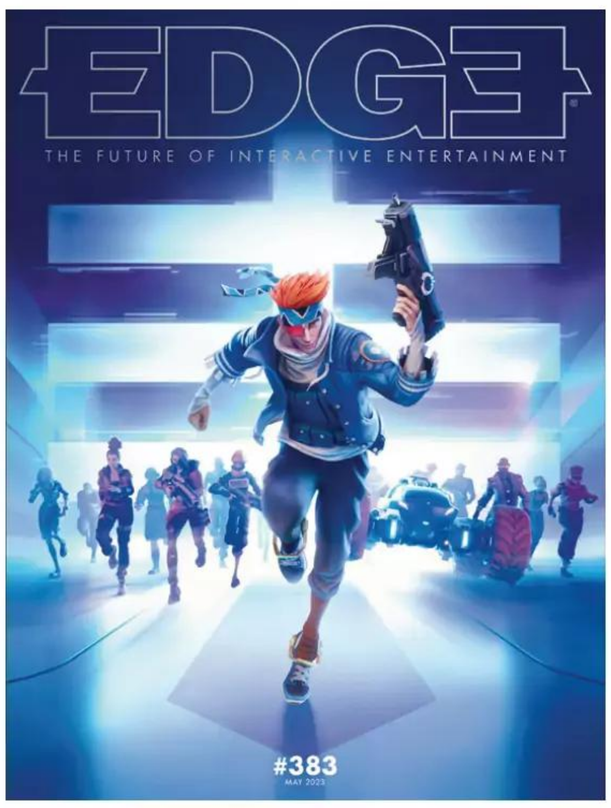

Issue 383

Dialogue

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

Highly cranked

While it's no PsychOdyssey, Panic's podcast has been offering a behind-the-scenes look at its Playdate console. This month's episode was dedicated to the system's new storefront: Catalog. As someone who has spent the past decade growing weary of the Wild West of digital marketplaces, there's a lot to like about Panic's approach here.

Edge and the Playdate have felt like kindred spirits since the system's unveiling in the cover story for **E**333. Never has that felt more true than when they discussed on the podcast how their goal was to emulate the feel of a magazine. Users visiting the store are greeted with a loading animation of magazine pages turning before arriving at a monthly updated layout of curated games available for purchase.

Having a small group of staff curate a storefront brings several practical advantages for Panic. First and foremost, they don't have the manpower to maintain an open marketplace like Steam. But they also wanted to keep their store from being an overwhelming experience, so they take a limited number of games and lay them out in a series of panels. I guess the experience of scrolling through endless lewd anime games on the Switch isn't for everyone!

Then there's Catalog's other gimmick: 'crank to buy'. Walking the line between a joyful experience and psychological manipulation, ample time was spent tweaking UI and UX so that it 'resists', forcing you to crank harder to confirm the purchase while providing a satisfying enough off-ramp if you change your mind. This runs counter to the "frictionless purchasing methods" elsewhere mentioned once again in **E**382.

The end result? A game store I actually enjoy browsing, which feels miraculous in 2023. I hope that the launch of Catalog will help sustain the system as initial preorders continue to trickle out. The game industry feels better off having magazine-level curation and the thoughtfulness it requires. I am sure you folks would agree.

Tanner Hoisington

Quite so – as outlined on p12 of this very issue, Catalog has a tactile, playful quality that recalls Nintendo at its best. Indeed, if **Edge** and Playdate really *are* kindred spirits, it's only right and proper that we should send you a T-shirt to wear as you browse.

Kingdom heart

When the SNES was about to come out, I remember getting a little booklet from that month's C&VG magazine (sorry, **Edge**, you didn't exist then – you were still a twinkle in Total Magazine's eye). It had some teasers for the SNES launch games – *F-Zero* looking like nothing I'd seen before, *A Link To The Past* and *Super Mario World* better looking than I could imagine. But at the back, it had the base stats, compared against NES and Mega Drive, and I was like, "OMG – 32,768 colours" (tragically, I didn't even have to Google that – it is hardwired into my brain). I was, like many still are, obsessed with graphics, and how, generation after generation, things got better and better. But as I got older, my eyes began to fail me, and soon, when it came down to 720p vs 1080p, my eyes could barely see the difference. I was super-excited about ray tracing, and the games do look spectacular, but the closer we get to realism, the less fun I seem to find it.

"Soon, when it came down to 720p vs 1080p, my eyes could barely see the difference"

All of which gets me to my actual point, and that is: if graphics are no longer the hook, why do I play? And the recent *Tears Of The Kingdom* gameplay demonstration reminded me. I followed the reaction on Twitter, and I found it fascinating. It was firmly split into two camps, one of which was very excited about the combinations

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

and play possibilities (I was in this camp), while the other was disappointed. The usual cries of "looks mid" or "Switch can't power decent-looking games" were trumpeted, as if a handheld should equal a PS5. So basically people would overlook the sequel to one of the – if not *the* – best game of the past decade because they didn't like how it looked. Personally, I like that Nintendo decided that, rather than spending six years building a new world entirely, they would iterate and spend six years refining systems. That is super brave, and we'll soon see if it pays off (it's Nintendo – I trust it).

I play because I like to have fun. I know lots of people hate dying in games, but I don't. Most often, it elicits a laugh in me – at my own lameness, at the designers creating something I couldn't best. I love it. *Elden Ring* and FromSoftware games, for all their 'git gud'-ness, are actually very funny. Things hiding in shadows, fake chests, wolves from the sky for no apparent reason. As for *Zelda*, I loved watching my little Link trace his journey across the map, and every death made me hoot.

And so I asked myself the question: why are people fixated on graphics? Every issue of **Edge** features some bleeding-edge graphics that make me go "wow", but why do we need such fidelity? And then it hit me: because everything else outside is pretty crappy. The world seems miserable, and so we need virtual worlds we can escape to – and the realer it is, the easier it is to escape.

I've lived a lot of my life in my imagination, either writing or painting, so I am comfortable filling in gaps in fidelity. I wonder if the cognitive load of worlds that aren't as detailed or realistically realised is too much for the kids of today, and so graphic artists have to slavishly capture the detail of a gunsight, or the way light plays across a leaf.

Whatever the reasons, I'm looking forward to *Tears Of The Kingdom*. I look forward to attaching mushrooms to shields and creating a smoke-spewing sword, because... well, just read that sentence back – it's mad. And that's what play should be.
Anand Modha

Ring around the not-so-rosy

I'm writing in response to Leo Tarasov's thoughtful and measured reply to my letter in **E**381 about *Elden Ring*.

Firstly, I'm happy that he agrees with me that the reaction to the game in some quarters was wholly over-the-top. The Guardian, one should remember, told us that "*Elden Ring* is the finest videogame yet made", in a review so pathetically fawning it was scarcely believable.

In opposition to my point about the lack of arguments made about *Elden Ring*'s "seminal" nature, Leo quotes **Edge**'s review: "In *Elden Ring*, you daub your own [icons] onto blank canvas... with vague outlines hinting at points of interest." Ultimately, Leo says, the argument for *Elden Ring*'s greatness lies in its "successful subversion of open-world game design married to... the well-regarded FromSoftware formula."

The only problem here is that it's widely acknowledged that *Breath Of The Wild* pioneered the subversion of open-world game design in 2017, so it's not clear to me why *Elden Ring* should have been lauded for it in 2022. Furthermore, the shadow of *Breath Of The Wild* obviously looms large over *Elden Ring*, but in trying to recreate the former's magic I think FromSoftware ultimately created something rather banal.

The reason why *Breath Of The Wild* is so special is because it created a living and enticing world that invites exploration, and with which you can interact in myriad ways – the only limitation is your imagination. It's also, I think, underpinned by a particular philosophy: namely, the characteristic Japanese reverence for nature.

Elden Ring, on the other hand, tries to replicate *Breath Of The Wild*'s freedom, but it's ultimately illusory; you have the 'freedom' to enter caves and fight monsters, but aside from that, what else can you do? How else can you interact with the world? (As an aside, it's worth mentioning other games that have done a great job actualising freedom, and here *GTAV* comes to mind.)

Leo also mentions "the quality of the art direction and boss designs", while also conceding that the latter can at times seem copy-pasted. Personally, I cannot understand why an art style that has been seen and done exhaustively over decades should be considered novel; I'd guess that most non-gamers, and maybe even a few gamers, would struggle to tell the artistic difference between *Elden Ring* and, say, the Lord Of The Rings films or Frank Frazetta artwork. That's not to say that the former's art is bad, but let's get over this notion that it's like a bolt from the blue.

Finally, Leo warns against reducing *Elden Ring* to yet another "game in which a man with a sword jumps around in the dark" (originally my words), lest other games, such as *Super Mario*, be reduced the same way. I'd come at it slightly differently, however. Mario, by his very conception and in his very appearance, is creative. Look at Mario (Tanooki Mario, Cat Mario, Bee Mario, etc), and creativity and wackiness scream at you in the face. The same is true, really, of all the cast of the Mushroom Kingdom, which may explain why those characters have become global pop-culture icons. With the very foundation of Mario being creative, then, it's not hard to see why every mainline Mario game is so ridiculously inventive, wacky, joyful, and, most important of all, fun. (As exceptional as *Super Mario Odyssey* is, *Super Mario Galaxy* remains, to my mind, a singular achievement in the entire medium, and the very definition of what a videogame should be.) If Mario's jumping around in the dark, it's only because he's trying to escape from Boo.
Ramsen Warda

It feels that a big test for Nintendo's approach to open-world design will arrive in the form of *Tears Of The Kingdom* – which certainly seems to have its share of entering caves and fighting monsters. Not long to go now. ■

STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Within the world of fairytales, there is nothing especially frog-like about a frog. Stories do not go into slimy detail about quotidian amphibious life. The frog could as easily be a squirrel, or a spider. Instead, the frog serves a narrative function: its purpose is to be kissed and turn into a prince or princess. Similarly, a fairytale does not explore the internal psychology and occult religion of a witch; she too exists primarily in terms of her function, to frustrate the hero or heroine's desires in numerous possible ways, including transforming them into a frog. A witch is simply a particular token of a narrative archetype: the "villain".

So goes, at least, the seminal analysis of fairy stories by the Russian literary scholar Vladimir Propp, in his The Morphology Of The Folktale. "The names of the dramatis personae change (as well as the attributes of each)," he writes, "but neither their actions nor functions change. From this we can draw the inference that a tale often attributes identical actions to various personages. This makes possible the study of the tale according to the functions of its dramatis personae."

It makes possible, too, a charming and uncommonly brilliant videogame in the form of Daniel Benmergui's *Storyteller*, famously more than a decade in gestation and finally released to the world as I write. It is, if you like, a sort of Proppian puzzle-chest. In each level you must place a given set of archetypal characters in various archetypal situations in order to fulfil the goal that is the title of the story. 'Surviving Spouses Find Comfort'? Very well, first we have to get two sets of people married and then have one partner from each pair die, before those left can fall in love. And we have to do it within a maximum of six comic-book frames.

That is a very simple early example; later challenges regularly surprise and delight after they initially mystify. As Benmergui has explained, running in the background of the game is a "story simulator" that checks whether the player's answer satisfies the demands of the title, and among the things it simulates are characters' motivations. It won't do, for example, simply to put a character in a panel with a bottle of poison and expect them to drink it (in one puzzle that is a comically heartless squashing-down of Romeo And Juliet) – you have to motivate them to want to drink it through previous narrative actions. The order in which things happen is of crucial importance for the meaning of each moment, as Propp observed: "An action cannot be defined apart from its place in the course of narration".

Illustration **konsume.me**

Storyteller is a truly original perspective on the age-old tension between videogames and narrative in general

New mechanics – which take the form of panel situation types such as "gun" or "amnesia" – are gradually introduced, leading the player to understand how they work through experiment and to uncover some hidden rules. (It turns out, for example, that it's possible to forget that you are dead.) Like all good puzzle games, *Storyteller* at length presents you with challenges that on first try seem bafflingly impossible, but they are never unfairly so. The gorgeous and playful soundtrack by composer Zypce, featuring lugubrious chamber-string arrangements of opera tunes and the like, helps to keep the psychological peace.

But this is not merely a clever puzzle game that uses narrative elements as fungible tiles to slide around. In solving these sardonic and allusive scenarios – whose influences range from Greek tragedy to Dracula or Agatha Christie; from a dwarf dumb-play of Hamlet to a version of Samuel Beckett that made me laugh out loud – one comes to realise that one is being gently invited to address the kinds of problems that novelists and dramatists themselves face. I need a reason for this person to want to push that person off a cliff; I need the butler to get access to a weapon sooner; I need these two to end up together after some trials.

Storyteller is not just a perfect and beautifully elegant game on its own terms, then, but a truly original perspective on the age-old tension between videogames and narrative in general. It's not a game that promises to let you "Create your own story!", as used to be the tagline for mildly branching FMV games. Instead, it instructs you to create *this* story, while giving you freedom to do it in different possible ways. In this way, *Storyteller* enacts an important truth – at least, for a Proppian – about storytelling in general. Perhaps there are, after all, only seven basic stories, but the devil – as well as the frog and the witch – is all in the detail.

Steven Poole is a writer, composer and author whose books include Trigger Happy 2.0, Unspeak, and Rethink

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WIRED PRODUCTIONS

ADRIAN HON

Alternate Reality

Notes from videogaming's borders

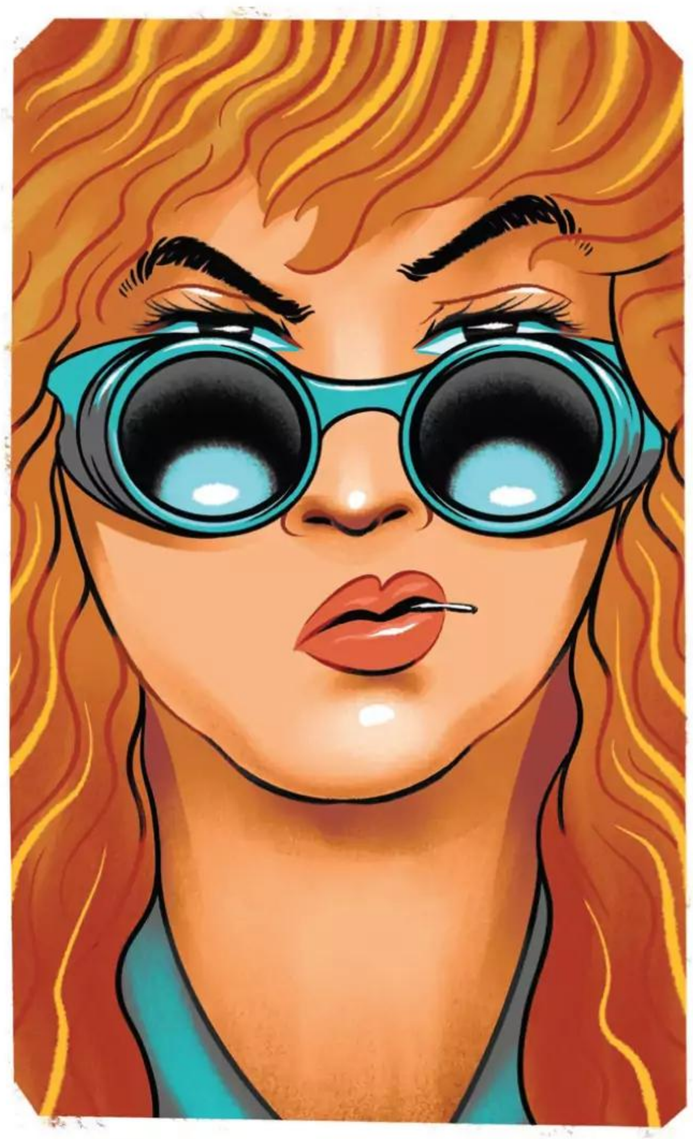
Over the past few months, millions of videogame followers have been delighted by their hobby directly inspiring one of the most critically acclaimed TV shows in recent years. No longer are the words "based on a videogame" accompanied by a whiff of desperation and mediocrity. Instead, we've been able to stand up proudly to proclaim: yes, I watch Poker Face.

You thought I was talking about that other show? HBO's The Last Of Us is entertaining TV, but it hews too closely to the galloping plot of the game to say all that much interesting about how people and societies survive or crumble under pressure. Poker Face, a detective show by Rian Johnson, the director of Glass Onion, is rather different – and it's at least partly thanks to games.

Poker Face, whose first series concluded in March in the US, stars Natasha Lyonne as Charlie Cale, a woman with the unusual ability to tell if someone is lying just by looking at their face. After the requisite hijinks in the pilot, Charlie goes on the run across the US, solving murders along the way. Anyone who's played Rockstar's *LA Noire* will already be jumping out of their seat at the obvious parallel, where a core mechanic involved questioning suspects while studying their facial expressions; if someone looked shifty, the player was meant to "doubt" them, whereupon the player character would invariably lose his rag and scare the poor, invariably innocent, suspect out of their wits.

As it turns out, Rian Johnson has stated that *LA Noire* was one of his inspirations for the TV show, for this exact reason. Another connection to *LA Noire* is more indirect, but no less charming: when you're at a crime scene and inspecting evidence, the camera will switch to an extreme close-up as you rotate an errant bullet or a mysterious note looking for clues. It's a motif taken from detective movies, and one that Johnson deploys in his own shows and movies.

One of those moments in Poker Face comes in its second episode, when Charlie has only just set off across the country. At a remote truck stop in New Mexico, she has to solve a murder while the clock is ticking; but, luckily for her, there are only three places to visit and only a handful of people to talk to. Its simplicity and beautiful cinematography reminded me of classic point-and-click adventures such as *Full Throttle*, where no clue is too small to overlook and no character too insignificant to learn from.



It reminded me of point-and-click adventures such as Full Throttle, where no clue is too small to overlook

Johnson's gaming credentials stretch back even further. He has also namechecked Infocom's influential 1982 text adventure *Deadline*, where you play a detective investigating an apparent suicide on an estate. Unusually, the game's events took place according to a clock, with each of the characters roaming around the estate pursuing their own agendas. Only by understanding who was where, and when, can you unravel the mystery, a dynamic that comes into play in Poker Face's more complex episodes, not to mention later games such as Jordan Mechner's *The Last Express*, from 1997, which took *Deadline*'s clock and thrust it into a realtime context, or Inkle Studios' highly replayable *Overboard!*, where, unusually, you have to perfectly cover up a murder you've already committed.

I've been putting off one of the most entertaining aspects of the show for too long, though: its homage to Columbo. At the start of almost every episode of Peter Falk's detective series, you'd watch a villain commit a crime, after which the eponymous character would be called in and gradually put the pieces together. The fun wasn't in figuring out how the crime happened – you've already seen that – but in seeing Columbo stumble around and annoy the villain with his increasingly pointed questioning.

These 'inverted detective stories', or 'howcatchems', aren't like any videogame I've played – it's hard to see how that'd work – but they are like watching someone play a videogame you've already completed. You get to vicariously enjoy their deductions as they struggle to solve conundrums and contradictions, and if the story is good enough, you don't mind seeing it again. In Poker Face, Charlie isn't an avid fan of videogames (though at one point she praises an arcade game's "haptics and whatnot"), but she's a wonderfully entertaining talker and always manages to explain what she's thinking and doing.

In other words, she wouldn't get far as a pro gamer, but she'd give any Twitch streamer a run for their money.

Adrian Hon is CEO of Six To Start, lead designer of Zombies, Run!*, and author of the recently published You've Been Played*

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LKA

WIRED PRODUCTIONS

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

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Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Hype content

The start of something new

They say you never get a second chance to make a first impression, and that's particularly crucial today with so many options vying for our free time. In games, once you've grabbed a player, the next most important thing is holding their attention – and if your game gets off to a slow or confusing start, you risk losing them. So a good tutorial is increasingly vital: how you show someone the ropes plays a significant part in determining how likely they are to continue.

For a game as delightfully dense as run-based strategy *The Banished Vault*, that's quite the challenge. Those well versed in the genre perhaps won't feel daunted going in, but designer Nic Tringali isn't taking any chances. His game teaches you in a number of ways: introductory scenarios that walk you through the basics of moving around a solar system and harvesting its resources; hiding interface elements that are irrelevant to the task at hand in order to focus player attention; and finally, a manual, laid out like a physical book, with step-by-step instructions and references for just about everything in the game.

When you're doing something *completely* new, as in mind-bending firstperson puzzler *Viewfinder*, the trick is to ease players in gradually. Here, 2D Polaroids become 3D level geometry when placed into the world; at first, the photos have been taken for you, and only once you've acclimatised to that do you get the chance to take snaps with your own in-game camera. This in turn has limited film and an *un*limited rewind function, letting you play around with this wonderful mechanic without fear of failure. Little chance of that in *Diablo IV*, which sits a good deal closer to the other end of the innovation scale: the early hours have us carving through enemies like a hot knife through butter. That's another way to hook players from the start. Keeping them there? Well, that's just the *next* thing to keep designers awake at night.

MOST WANTED

Street Fighter 6
PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox Series
A bustling WASD booth is a reminder that the showfloor is a natural home for Capcom's storied series. Since we're unlikely to see Taito's *Street Fighter 6: Type Arcade* in many UK locations, playing the consumer version in public this way feels like the next best thing – even after some repeated trouncings.

Pikmin 4
Switch
That dog's got no nose. How does it smell? While we continue to be weirded out by this Oatchi fellow, we're looking forward to marshalling the new Ice Pikmin in dungeon-style areas that are strongly reminiscent of the second game.

Fort Solis
PC, PS5
This 'thirdperson thriller' still feels like a slightly unknown quantity, despite the presence of veteran performers Troy Baker and Roger Clark. In a few weeks' time, we should learn quite a bit more.

HYPE

DIABLO IV

Blizzard's infernal ARPG opens its gates

Developer/publisher	Blizzard Entertainment
Format	PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Origin	US
Release	June 6

Cleaving our way through the demons of Sanctuary, we quickly learn not to get too attached to what's around us – and not only because our progress won't carry over to *Diablo IV*'s full release. NPCs who at first seem to take on great importance soon die, depart or betray us. Each town we visit is replaced by another dingy hamlet never far away. And as we venture into underground dungeons for loot, it quickly becomes obvious that a tactical retreat is often more valuable than whatever prize lies at the end.

Yet it's our interactions with other players that cement this sense of ephemeral progress. After partying up with a couple of online adventurers in the wilderness of Fractured Peaks – a harsh, icy wasteland and the opening area to which we are limited – we set out on a somewhat uncommunicative journey across the map. Relying only on a limited set of emotes and a text box that's little use when talking to non-English speakers, our group uncovers a handful of new regions, ticks off a couple of sidequests and clears a few dungeons that had given us grief when we attempted them solo. Mobs of enemies are easier to dispatch in a party, and the loot more frequent. It's so good, in fact, that one dungeon's generous haul satisfies our companions, who promptly teleport away with naught but a goodbye. In the world of Sanctuary, it seems, party members are among the most fickle finds of all – invaluable when you have them, but hard to keep hold of.

Although it's not mandatory, this kind of unprompted cooperative dungeon-delving looks to be in many respects the defining feature of *Diablo IV*. Handing you a large open map sprinkled with dungeons, merchants and quest markers, it wears many of the same clothes as an MMO. Other players wander around the overworld beside you, and just like last year's disappointingly rudimentary *Diablo Immortal*, multiplayer meet-ups are never far away. Even for those outside of parties or dedicated clans, random events in the overworld – ranging from occult summoning rituals you must race against the clock to stop, to overturned caravans that need protecting from demonic enemies – often bring players together in short, seemingly spontaneous moments of propulsive carnage.

Momentary co-op sprees like these do little to change the mob-thumping combat, but they pair nicely with a newfound focus on story. Between lush, big-budget cutscenes of the sort we've come to expect from Blizzard, optional NPC interactions add weight to the world that exists beyond the screen, and plentiful dialogue brings a sense that there's more to Sanctuary than a dizzying number ▶

Rogue demon Lilith spells bad news for Sanctuary, if only because of her penchant for blood, worrying talk of divine prophecies, and many scary monikers

of ancient subterranean tunnels. Among the talk of divine wars and destructive prophecies, a bleak fatalism bleeds into every inch of Fractured Peaks. After *Diablo III* turned away from the oppressive visuals of its predecessors for a slightly brighter tone, Blizzard has returned to ultra-dark, pseudo-Catholic medieval imagery. Religious zealots burn suspected heathens without remorse, peasants spend their days counting their boils or missing children, and little salvation lies on the horizon.

World-building, in other words, no longer feels like a cursory excuse for non-stop demon-slaying, but a convincing sell. Yet we wonder if this new storytelling focus is more revelatory than even Blizzard knows. *Diablo IV*, at least in these early hours, doesn't ask much of the player, and, like past games in the series, streamlines the most arduous elements of the roleplaying genre into a feverish

Peasants spend their days counting their boils, and little salvation lies on the horizon

mouse-clicking reverie. But as sidequests and other attempts at telling emotionally arresting stories send you off the beaten track, they interrupt the plodding momentum on which that combat loop relies. As we try to get back into monster mulching, we can't help but see how reductive it all is – the habitual power trip that's long been a staple of the series looks a touch monotonous next to the CRPGs it's trying to narratively match.

Combat is at least shaken up through five classes – Barbarian, Sorceress, Druid, Rogue and Necromancer – that lend themselves to distinct playstyles and tactics. As a skeleton-summoning Necromancer, tight area-of-effect attacks can turn whole groups of enemies into corpses, which can then be detonated in high-damage explosions to take out tougher foes. Sorcerers, meanwhile, must use elemental spells to slow, distract and kill enemies at range before they come within fatal striking distance. Higher-level summoning skills can be used to maintain distance, or you have the option to spec your spell-slinger as a glass cannon if you prefer to wield a precarious juggernaut. Active and passive abilities are handed out generously, and it's not long before you're given a full six-skill tableau to play with. Alongside standard attacks and more powerful mana-hungry abilities, dodging is key to positioning yourself around tougher bosses, and teleportation skills must be deployed to wriggle out of enemy snares.

Outside of a robust character creation screen, customisation is delivered through class-specific skill trees, which replace the more limited skill categories of *Diablo III*. Multiple choices hang off every branch, and a minimal respec cost encourages you to play around with new abilities and synergies. Out in the world, environmental hazards such as explosive barrels, crumbling ceilings and thick fog add another dimension to fights, and while enemies in the starter area dish out similar attacks, the demons have never looked so diverse. We're surprised, though, at how little the classes can work together to defeat them. Playing in co-op, it's unnecessary and often impractical to coordinate attacks. Rogues can daze groups of enemies, setting them up for Barbarians to take out in a single swing, while Sorcerers are able to freeze monsters in place. But in practice, your character is so powerful that most brawls reduce down to tense exercises of mana management as you watch your cooldowns and keep tabs on your life potions. It's a product of the game's hybrid singleplayer and multiplayer design, and has us wondering what kind of game Blizzard wants this to be.

There's still much to be seen, of course. More powerful abilities have undoubtedly been saved for the later nodes of the skill trees, which are inaccessible for our preview. The world, too, will open up, with Fractured Peaks forming only a fraction of its surface. Yet perhaps the most important part is what can't yet be shown. With its extensive online multiplayer features, and the legacy of *Diablo III*'s mutation into a live-service ARPG still looming large (not to mention the shadow of *Diablo Immortal*), this fourth iteration looks set for continual expansion. If this is a sign of things to come, the full release could well be on the path to ascension. ■

Devilishly chic

We wouldn't recommend holidaying there, but you could do worse than Fractured Peaks for a shopping spree. Alchemists hawk essential health potion upgrades and brew other elixirs from scavenged vegetation. Jewellers can now fit sockets to items to ready them for stat-boosting gems, while the Purveyor Of Curiosities lets you blindly spend Obols – a secondary currency earned through challenges and random events – on powerful gear. The blacksmith's repair and upgrade options feel a touch redundant in the early game, when even rare drops are plentiful, but will surely come in handy after you've grown attached to a favourite weapon. The same goes for your appearance: salvage an item, and it will be saved as a cosmetic in your wardrobe. The adventurers of Sanctuary have never looked so fly.

TOP **Tougher enemies can hurl all manner of tasty projectiles. Deploy your most powerful spells against them, and combat soon becomes a wonderful mess of magical attacks.** FAR LEFT **Side characters come and go, some of them introduced through full cutscenes. On the acting side, this is Ralph Ineson's second Hype appearance in a row, following *FFXVI* in E383.** ABOVE **We've seen prettier maps, but it's refreshing to gradually discover a region that's free from cluttered icons and points of interest.** LEFT **The city of Kyovoshad serves as the first hub of the overworld, bringing together merchants and quest-givers, along with other players**

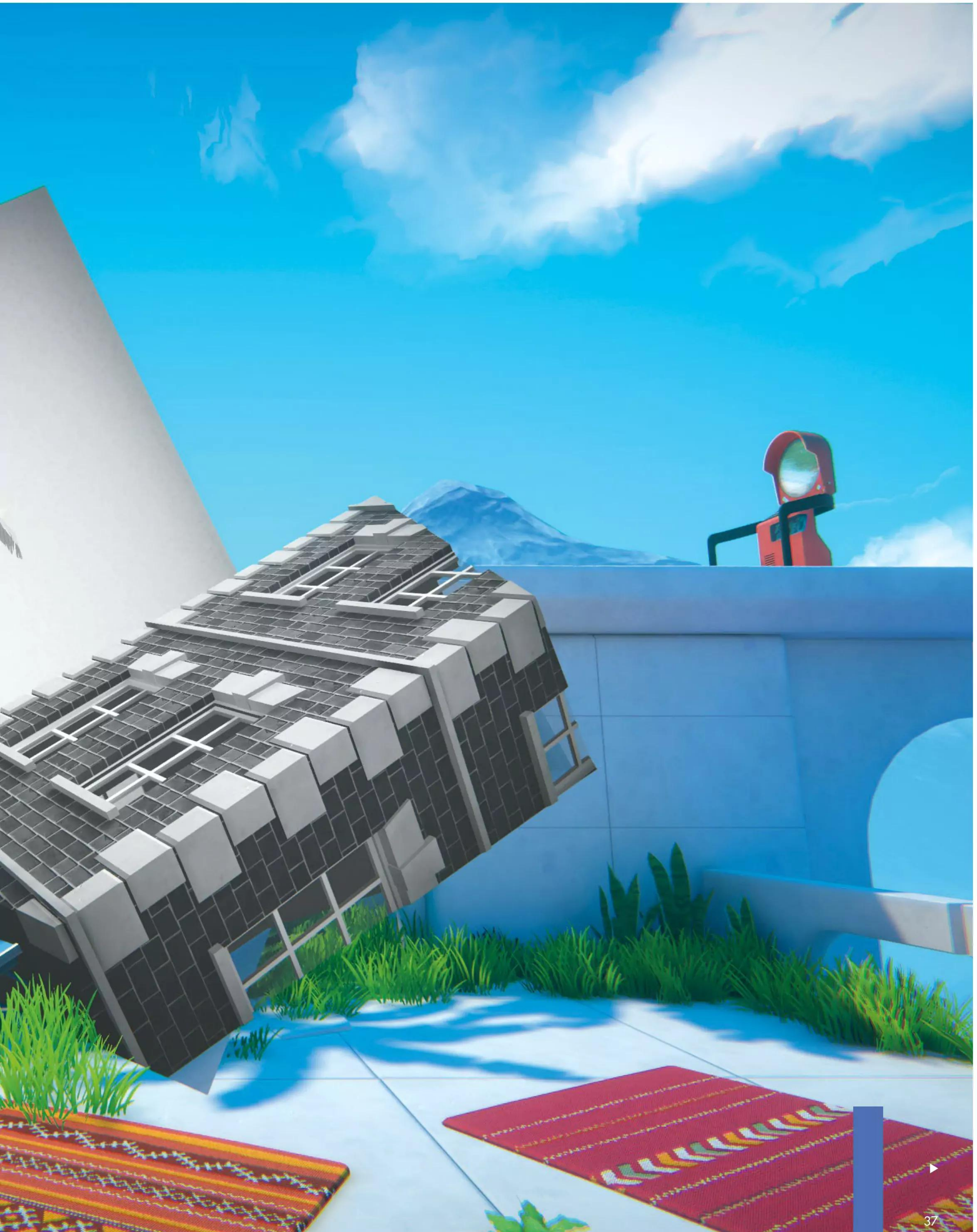
All of the pictures you're able to place in *Viewfinder*'s world are rendered in a distinct style, to help differentiate base reality from the one you summon on top of it

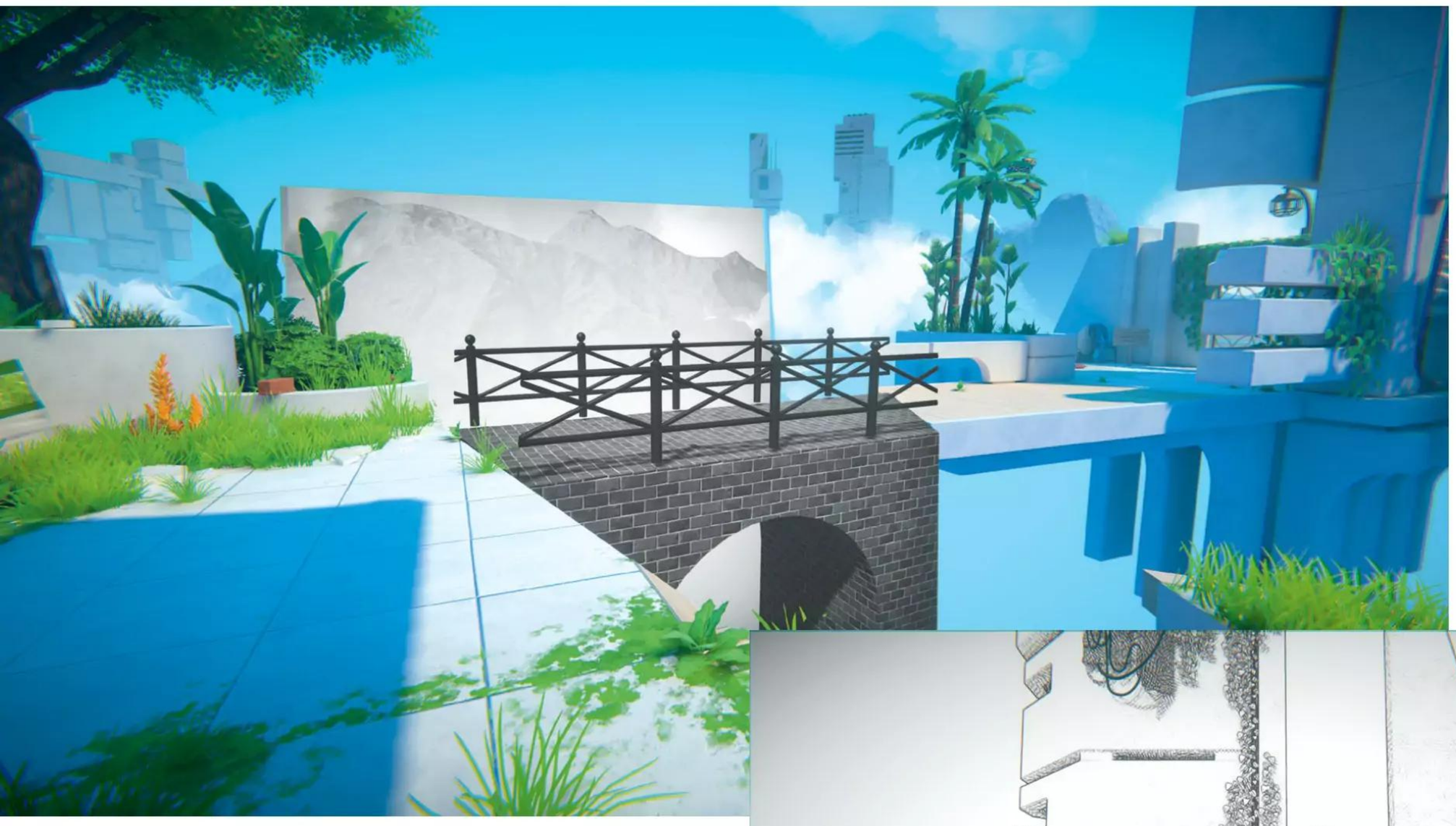
H|Y
P|E

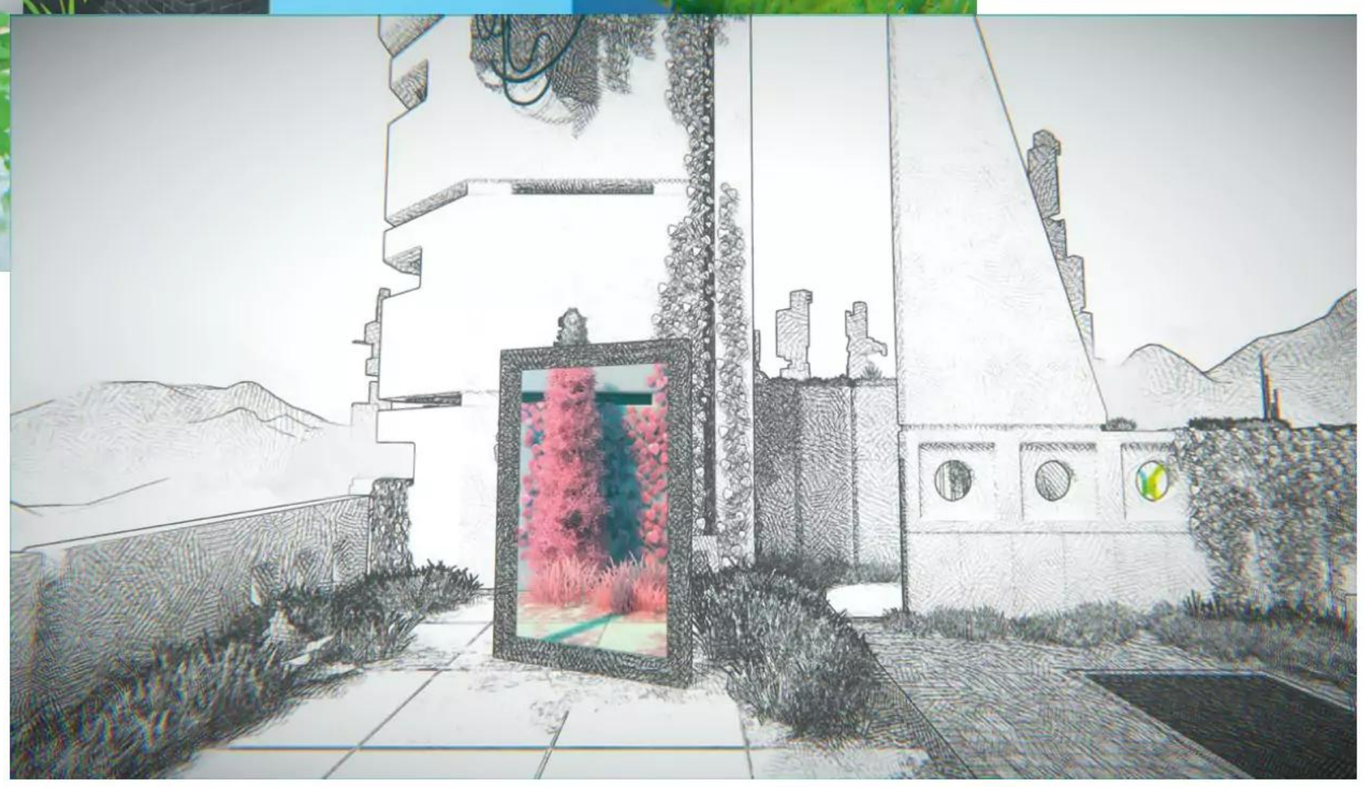
VIEWFINDER

A picturesque puzzler with far more than one weird trick to show you

Developer	Sad Owl Studios
Publisher	Thunderful Games
Format	PC, PS5
Origin	Various
Release	2023







LEFT **The world of *Viewfinder* has been abandoned. That created a challenge, Knowles says: "How do you make something overgrown and messy, but not so messy it distracts from the puzzles?"**
BELOW **With the game's in-picture worlds dancing between visual styles, its default look has moved from an initial painterly approach to something cleaner and more neutral**

ABOVE **As well as *Portal* and *Manifold Garden*, there's a healthy dose of *The Witness* in *Viewfinder*'s design.**
RIGHT **Completing optional challenges will unlock filters, from oil painting to pixel art, that can be applied to your own photographs – including their three-dimensional counterparts**

Sophie Knowles (lead artist) and Matt Stark (game director)

The first time we pick up one of *Viewfinder*'s pictures and place it down in the world, it feels like magic. The contents of the black-and-white Polaroid immediately pop into three dimensions, cutting a slice out of the level geometry that was previously there and allowing us to step inside a cross-section of world that, just a few seconds ago, was held in our hands. It's a remarkable trick, but one for which we've been prepared since late 2019, when game director **Matt Stark** tweeted a few short videos of a prototype he was toying with, between classes for his computer science degree at Dundee's Abertay University. Those tweets blew up, one of them attracting nearly half a million views, allowing him to turn this student side-project into a full game with a team of up to 20 developers – itself a kind of magic, surely.

What we couldn't tell from those videos, though, was whether the trick would grow old with repetition. Playing a substantial preview build of *Viewfinder*, we're relieved to discover that the magic of those early videos persists. In building out that early tech demo into a game, Stark and team have been careful to extend the concept in as many directions as possible. "We're trying not to be a one-trick pony," lead artist **Sophie Knowles** says. "All of it comes down to pictures, yes, but done in so many different ways." Over the course of an hour, we experience photos turned upside down, gravity kicking in as their contents enter our reality; pictures painted onto walls in strips, waiting to be lined up by a carefully placed eye before they'll invite us inside; a photocopier that allows us to nest the same chunk of level within itself over and over. Until eventually the game hands you its superweapon: the camera.

Suddenly you're able to choose not only where to place these pictures, but also what they're *of*. Need a platform to reach that distant ledge? Just snap a photo of the floor beneath your feet to duplicate the surface. Need three batteries to power up a level-ending teleporter, when you currently only have one? A shot of the one in your possession will include a copy you can grab. As Stark himself admits, with a smile: "The camera mechanic is massively overpowered. If there's something you want to get to, you can get to it immediately. So a lot of the puzzle mechanics come from ways we restrict what you're able to do."

In our demo, this primarily means you're given limited film for the camera, so you can't simply replicate everything into infinity. This isn't especially strict, however, and the game is generous with an unlimited rewind that makes it easy to undo mistakes. In part this is because "we want to encourage playing around with the camera," Knowles explains, but also to make sure the game gradually introduces players to its more mind-bending concepts. In this respect the team are taking their lead from *Portal*, which, as Knowles puts it, "is 90 per cent tutorial, all the way through". And the similarities are unmistakable: puzzles driven by the placement of batteries on circuits, rather than crates on buttons; an ever-present voiceover keeping you company throughout. But then if you're going to borrow, it might as well be from the very best.

A photocopier allows us to nest the same chunk of level within itself over and over

For players seeking a stricter challenge, there are also optional challenge levels – and, Stark hints, even a few secrets buried beneath the surface. But even if we are never truly taxed over *Viewfinder*'s short runtime (likely to be around three or four hours when complete), it seems churlish to complain about that when the game so consistently manages to turn our brain upside down in other ways, including a few ingenious twists we're not allowed to talk about just yet. The magic of Stark's original idea is something that doesn't fade, it seems, even for the developers. "Whenever I'm away from the project for a couple of weeks," he says, "when I come back to it, I'm like, 'Oh, *damn*'." With no solid release date set, it'll be more than a couple of weeks before we come back to *Viewfinder*. Based on what we've seen so far, though, it's hard not to anticipate having the same reaction the next time we see it. ■

Sufficiently advanced

The technology behind *Viewfinder* wasn't too hard to conjure, at least by Stark's standards: "We're modifying a bunch of meshes, which involves some vector maths, but it isn't *that* complex." The tricky thing is doing it at speed, while also following the self-set rule that the world and photos would fit together seamlessly. The biggest challenge on this front, he explains, was lighting: "Suppose you have a column, and it's casting a shadow on the ground, and you take a picture of just the shadow and put it somewhere else – that shadow still needs to be there. Or if you place a picture over where that column was standing, the shadow it was casting to the right shouldn't suddenly disappear, because then it wouldn't be seamless."

HYPE

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE: NECROM

Magic, memory and Morrowind: getting to the crux of it with 2023's expansion

Developer	ZeniMax Online Studios
Publisher	Bethesda Softworks
Format	PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Origin	US
Release	June 5 (PC), June 20 (consoles)

Some multiplayer games, it's fair to say, can take a while to find their feet – and that's certainly true of *The Elder Scrolls Online*. By creative director **Rich Lambert**'s own admission, the MMO's launch in 2014 "wasn't fantastic", with the game initially experiencing something of an identity crisis. "We didn't really know the game we were trying to make," he reflects today. "We were trying to straddle that line between *Elder Scrolls* and MMO, and I don't think we did either particularly well."

Fast-forward to 2023, and *The Elder Scrolls Online* is about to receive its seventh chapter update, introducing over 30 hours of quests and a whole new playable class. Since 2015, the team at ZeniMax Online Studios has added about 40 hours' worth of new content to the game each year, and this diligent approach has helped foster a large, committed playerbase. *The Elder Scrolls Online* now boasts a total of 22 million player accounts, with an additional two million new players joining the game last year alone – and has recently received critical recognition, too, in the form of a BAFTA Games nomination for best Evolving Game. "The first two years of launch were about learning and deciding what kind of game we wanted to make," Lambert explains. "And since then, it has been about continually refining that – first and foremost, it is an *Elder Scrolls* game – but also refining how we tell stories."

The game's forthcoming expansion, the ominously titled *Necrom*, seems poised to deliver a particularly grandiose story arc. This chapter sees players return to Morrowind, this time to an eastern area known as the Telvanni Peninsula. Within this area can be found the city of Necrom, where the dark elves bury their dead. It's a city of ceremonial importance, and one with some wild rumours about its origins. The city may, or may not, have been founded on the bones of a great beast after it was slain by the god-king Vivec. (Which may, or may not, explain why many of the rocks surrounding Necrom seem to resemble giant ribs.)

Necrom's origins are just one mystery of many for the player to discover, since a key theme of the chapter is the idea of secrets – specifically, unease about those secrets. At the centre of the main quest is the daedric prince of knowledge and memory, Hermaeus Mora. This enigmatic figure needs help in combating a conspiracy against him, and in classic *Elder Scrolls* fashion, the safety of the entire world is at stake. The prince guards a secret so powerful that, were it to be discovered, reality itself could unravel. For this reason, you must venture ▶

The Telvanni Peninsula functions as your base of operations in Necrom. "We picked it because it's Morrowind," Lambert says. "It's a chance for us to do something a little different, but still bringing that nostalgic feeling"

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE: NECROM

into Hermaeus Mora's realm of Apocrypha: an alien, book-filled landscape that promises both the rewards and dangers of unlimited knowledge.

For Lambert, the decision to focus on Hermaeus Mora was partly to distance the chapter from the more traditional fantasy setting of previous expansion *High Isle* – but Hermaeus Mora also promised a feeling of "cosmic horror" that *The Elder Scrolls Online* was yet to explore. "We really liked the idea of Hermaeus Mora and this kind of all-knowing being that is all about hoarding knowledge and keeping it to themselves," he explains. "The Telvanni instantly came to mind, because they are some of the most powerful mages in all of Tamriel. We thought the two would go really well together."

Like many of the MMO's previous chapters, *Necrom* revisits past locations from the *Elder Scrolls* series and gives them a

The city of Necrom has not been seen in an Elder Scrolls game since Arena in 1994

modern makeover. Hermaeus Mora and the realm of Apocrypha are best known from *Skyrim*'s *Dragonborn* DLC, while the city of Necrom has not been seen in an *Elder Scrolls* game since the very first title, *Arena*, in 1994. For the art team, reimagining older locations isn't simply a matter of duplicating assets – it's about recreating themes and mood. "It's a bit of a balance – we don't want to copy, but we want to be good shepherds of where people have gone before," art director **CJ Grebb** says. "It's a sense of reverence plus a sense of, well, we've still got to put our artistic zhuzh into it." It also doesn't hurt to have an enormous amount of institutional knowledge on hand: if Grebb ever wants to test whether a location feels nostalgic, he can simply call on an in-house expert for that particular game.

The Elder Scrolls Online art director CJ Grebb

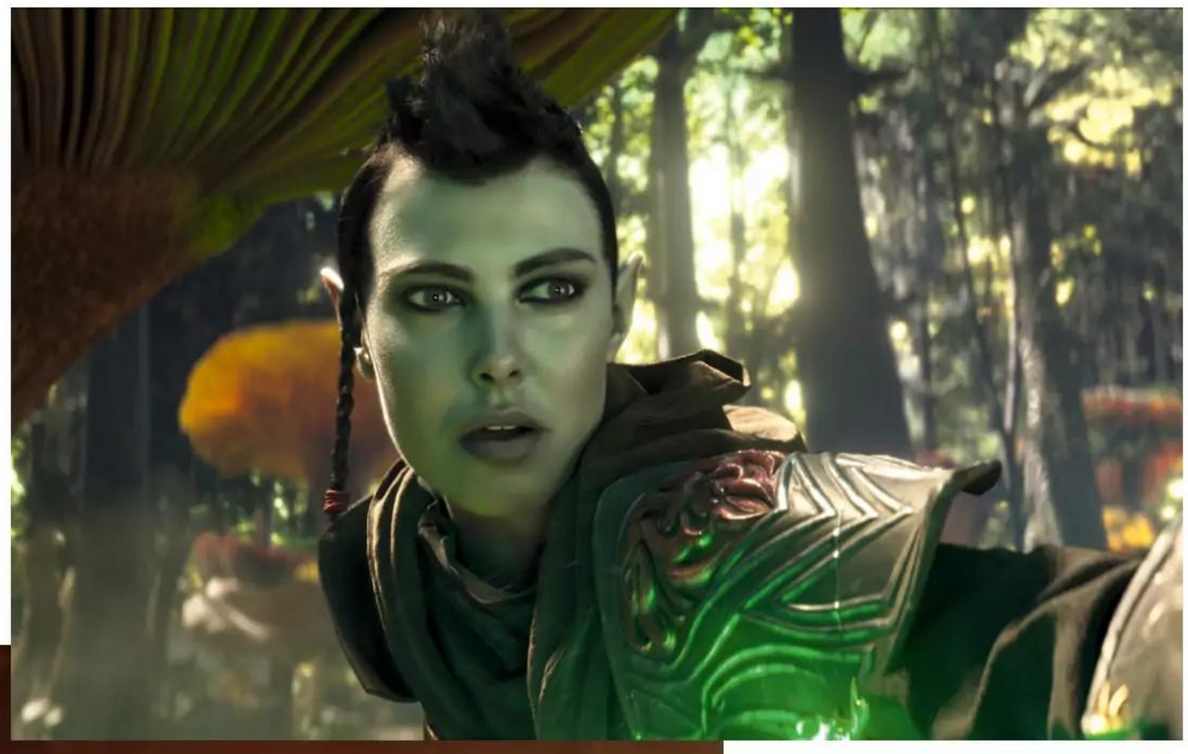
One of the standout features of the *Necrom* update is, of course, its new class. Capable of destructive, defensive and restorative magic, the Arcanist is based on the idea of magic influenced by forbidden knowledge. It's the third class to be added to the game since launch, with its predecessor, the Necromancer, having been introduced nearly four years ago. The main reason for this gap, Lambert explains, is that each new class – with its new animations, effects and tech – has the potential to create performance issues. Fitting a new gameplay style into an existing framework can also be a challenge, and sure enough, figuring out the Arcanist's mechanics was no easy task: the class had to be temporarily renamed 'Bob' to prevent the team from becoming stuck on the name.

"Once we did that, then we really started coming through with the ideas," Lambert laughs. "We wanted the class to be integrated into the story, and we wanted the class to play very differently from all the other classes. With those two acceptance criteria, we ended up with crux, and the influences from Hermaeus Mora." This crux mechanic – a form of combo points system – is a defining feature of the Arcanist's playstyle. Some abilities allow you to build up crux, while others consume it to create a more powerful version of a spell. In our preview session, we find ourselves carefully structuring our fights to build up crux, before unleashing a barrage of powerful abilities later in the battle. The Arcanist also features some slower abilities – such as a book that shoots a laser beam – that demand you think carefully about timing and positioning before you commit to an attack.

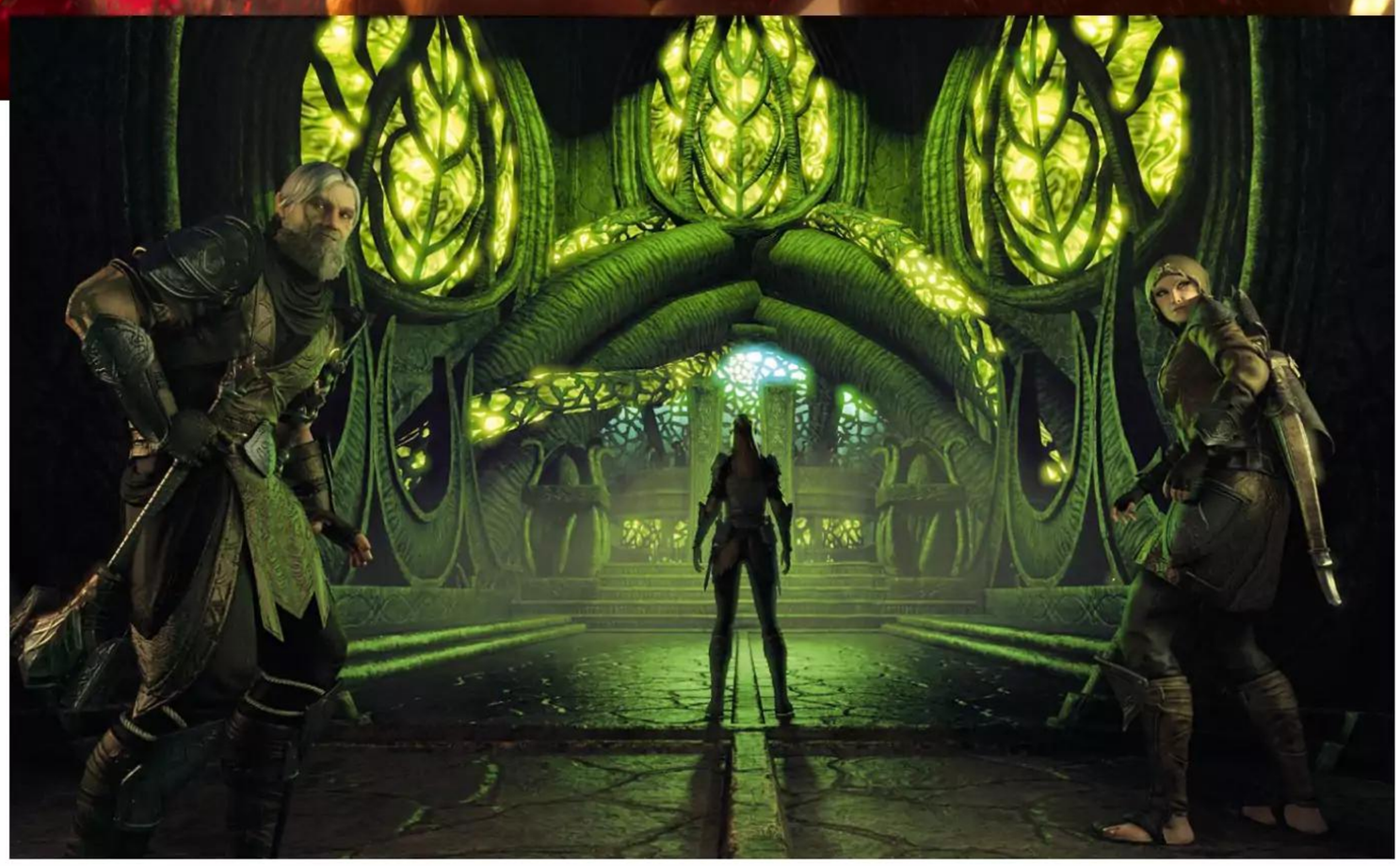
Elsewhere in the update, there's a new 12-player trial called Sanity's Edge, which takes players into the nightmares of a tormented mage, and you can find two new companions to befriend: a gruff argonian warden, and a knowledge-obsessed redguard alchemist. Plenty, then, to keep players busy – with a lot more also on the horizon for next year, when the MMO celebrates its tenth anniversary. As for the future of *The Elder Scrolls Online* beyond that? "I think it'll go on as long as we have the passion and motivation to make it," Grebb says. "That's as long as the community is still playing it, and we see no indication that the community wants to stop playing it. We would certainly love to continue making it for many, many years to come." ■

Necrom on and on

For the past four years, *The Elder Scrolls Online* has followed a 'year-long adventure' cycle with storylines told over the course of 12 months. This year, however, sees the return of complete storylines delivered in one update. The reason for the change, as Lambert (above) explains, is that while the previous roadmap made logistical sense – giving the art team time to prepare for the year ahead – it was starting to restrict the team's narrative options. "It gives us the opportunity to go bigger on our story," Lambert says. "We had to tell a story that you could jam into a year. Now that burden is off, we could tell the story over the course of the year, or over several years. It's just freeing."

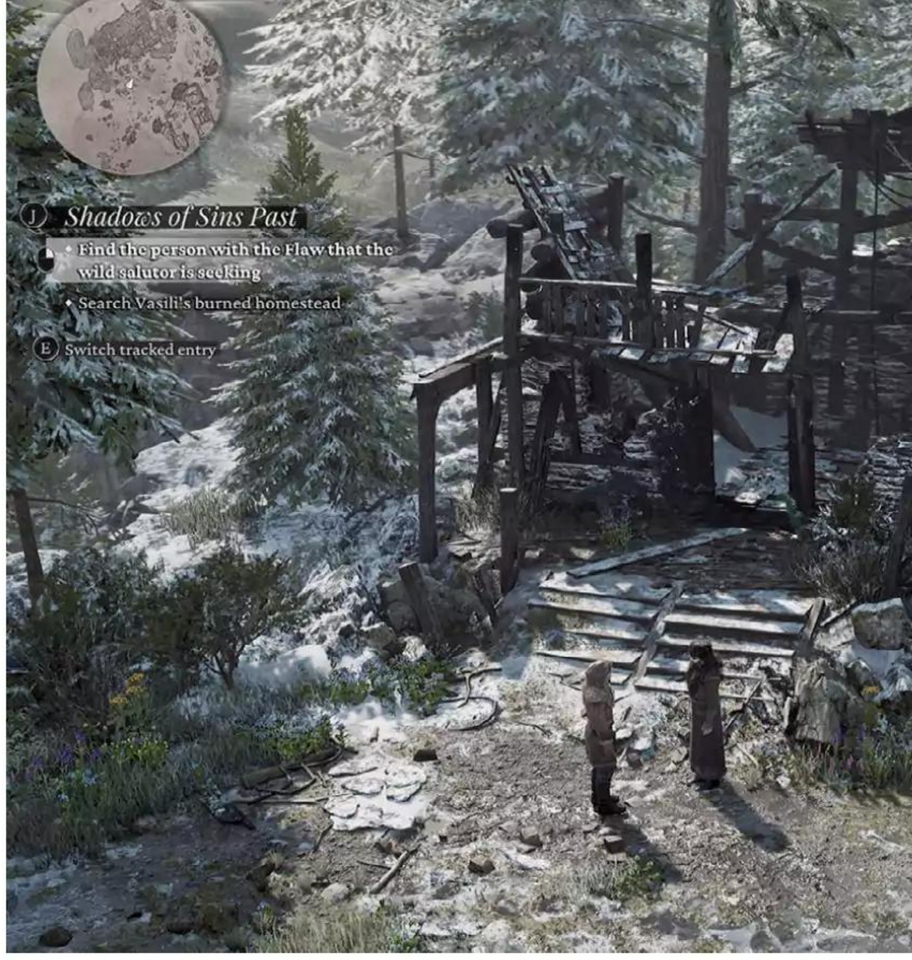


TOP **With combat abilities based on tentacles, tomes and runic symbols, you can clearly see the influence of Hermaeus Mora on the Arcanist's skill set.**
ABOVE **Cosmic horror, HP Lovecraft and alien landscapes were the key inspirations behind the chapter's eerie visuals.**
MAIN **As seen in the CG trailer, one of *Necrom*'s main antagonists is a dremora named Torvesard. His allegiances and motivations are unclear, making it difficult to tell whether he's friend or foe. A frenemy, perhaps?**



TOP **Along with familiar enemies such as *Skyrim*'s seekers, *Necrom* introduces several brand-new foes. The hushed are twisted, humanoid figures: mortals who lingered for too long in Apocrypha, and were warped by exposure to dangerous knowledge.**
RIGHT **Unusually for *The Elder Scrolls Online*, this chapter's storyline ends on a cliffhanger. "There's still going to be a great resolution at the end, but we're just going to drop the mic and walk away," Lambert says. "We'll see how players take it"**

Developer
Fool's Theory
Publisher
11 Bit Studios
Format PC
Origin Poland
Release 2023



THE THAUMATURGE

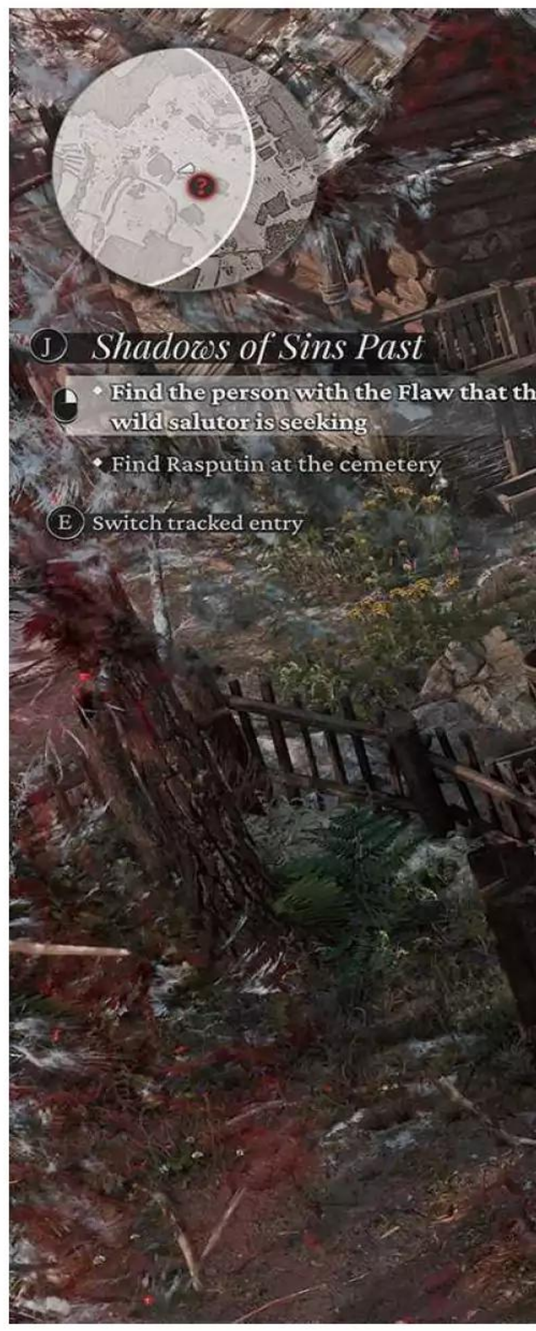
Mystical investigations in early-20th-century Warsaw

Given an early peek at this isometric RPG, we're reminded of WolfEye Studios' *Weird West* (p90). Not for any substantial similarities, but the shared context of their development: just as ex-Arkane veterans struck out to make that pocket-sized Western, former CD Projekt Red developers have come together for this more modest project. Founded by alumni of *The Witcher* series and *Cyberpunk 2077*, Fool's Theory is making a game smaller in scale than those blockbusters, but one that may capture the same spirit. "We try to give players as much freedom as possible in terms of making choices and conducting combat," design director **Karolina Kuzia-Rokosz** says. "We avoid forced or unnatural solutions that might seem counterintuitive and, despite having a defined hero with a defined past, we want players to be able to mould him within a certain framework along the way."

Yet perhaps a more telling, if superficial, comparison is *Pokémon*. Protagonist Wiktor Szulski is less monster hunter than monster tamer: a magically attuned Thaumaturge, capable of sensing and capturing demons called Salutors that haunt the traumas of others. On your journey to face Wiktor's own inner demons, wild Salutors can be added to your arsenal. Each lies at the end of an investigative quest, and must be discovered by unpicking the trauma that attracted it. In practice, that means identifying clues in hidden-object segments, schmoozing or maiming NPCs in dialogue and combat, and following visual breadcrumb trails akin to Geralt's Witcher sense.

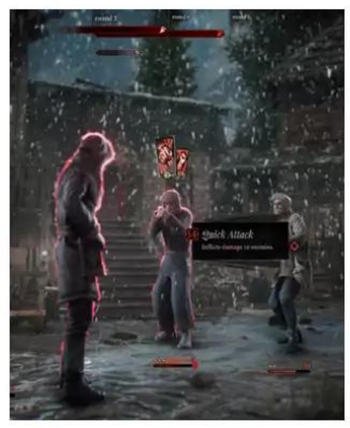
"The exploration part is like *Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales*," Kuzia-Rokosz says, "but the combat has a JRPG flavour thanks to the camera angle and its UI, which resembles *Persona 5*." Turn-based fights are split into rounds, and an action queue signals upcoming enemy attacks. That leaves you to choose between instant blows, multi-round build-up abilities, or 'diversion' moves that can halt queued enemy actions. "Salutors take part in combat and broaden its diversity with their varied attacks and effects, giving different statuses to enemies," Kuzia-Rokosz says. They serve more of a support role, and can be swapped between mid-fight for their different psychic abilities.

> ***"We try to give players as much freedom as possible in terms of making choices"***



When the fists come out, you're usually outnumbered, but your opponents don't have powerful carnivorous psychic demons to rely on

The supernatural only makes up half of this world. Set in 1905, Wiktor's story takes place in a semi-historical Warsaw under Imperial Russian rule. "It's an interesting setting because of the cultural melting pot [that] Warsaw was at that time," Kuzia-Rokosz says. "It broadens the variety of possibilities that can be conveyed in music, design of the Salutors, or languages we can use in the game."



TOP LEFT **A small town is the setting for the prologue, before Wiktor is called to Warsaw to face his internal, and paternal, demons.**
TOP RIGHT **An early investigation to find a wild Salutor leads Wiktor to a fire, a murder, and plenty of red herrings on the way.**
ABOVE **Wiktor's spiritual powers can be engaged to reveal hidden objects**

Real historical figures appear (it doesn't take long for Wiktor to encounter Grigori Rasputin), but Kuzia-Rokosz says the team's archival research was most important in understanding the city's appearance and social behaviour. "The stories of those ordinary people are rarely black and white," she says. "They differ on various levels – their cultural heritage, social position and accumulated wealth – and *The Thaumaturge* is a game telling their different stories."

Warsaw is perhaps an obvious setting for a Polish developer, but Kuzia-Rokosz says the time period was consciously chosen. "It was a painful period in Poland's history, as our country, torn by foreign partitions, was absent from maps. I have a feeling that all that context isn't well known, so it's great to be able to capture it, tell it through the game and show it to a wider audience." Right now, though, the contemporary parallels are unfortunately fresh. Kuzia-Rokosz says design documentation wrapped before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the team "nevertheless knew how cruel the times were back then, and that people suffered." It's that kind of latent darkness that makes the Salutors such a recognisable metaphor. "They serve as a personification of folk beliefs," Kuzia-Rokosz says. "And in terms of the story, their presence conveys the message that it's really impossible to achieve great things on your own." Put another way, humanity's demons may be closer than we'd like to think. ■

Salutor sense

Investigations to find Salutors have predetermined ends, but your route to reach them can vary. By levelling up Wiktor's psychological traits – Heart, Deed, Mind and Word – you can unlock dialogue options or improve your Thaumaturgical powers so you can sense more clues. In these moments, the game is driven as much by dialogue and examination as combat, and with its backdrop of political turmoil, the tone echoes that of the early hours of *The Witcher 3*. "Of course, we want to write our own story," Kuzia-Rokosz says. "But since there are many people [from CD Projekt Red] in our studio, we're doing it through certain similarities to those big projects we worked on previously."

Developer/ publisher Bithell Games (Lunar Division)
Format PC
Origin US
Release Summer

THE BANISHED VAULT

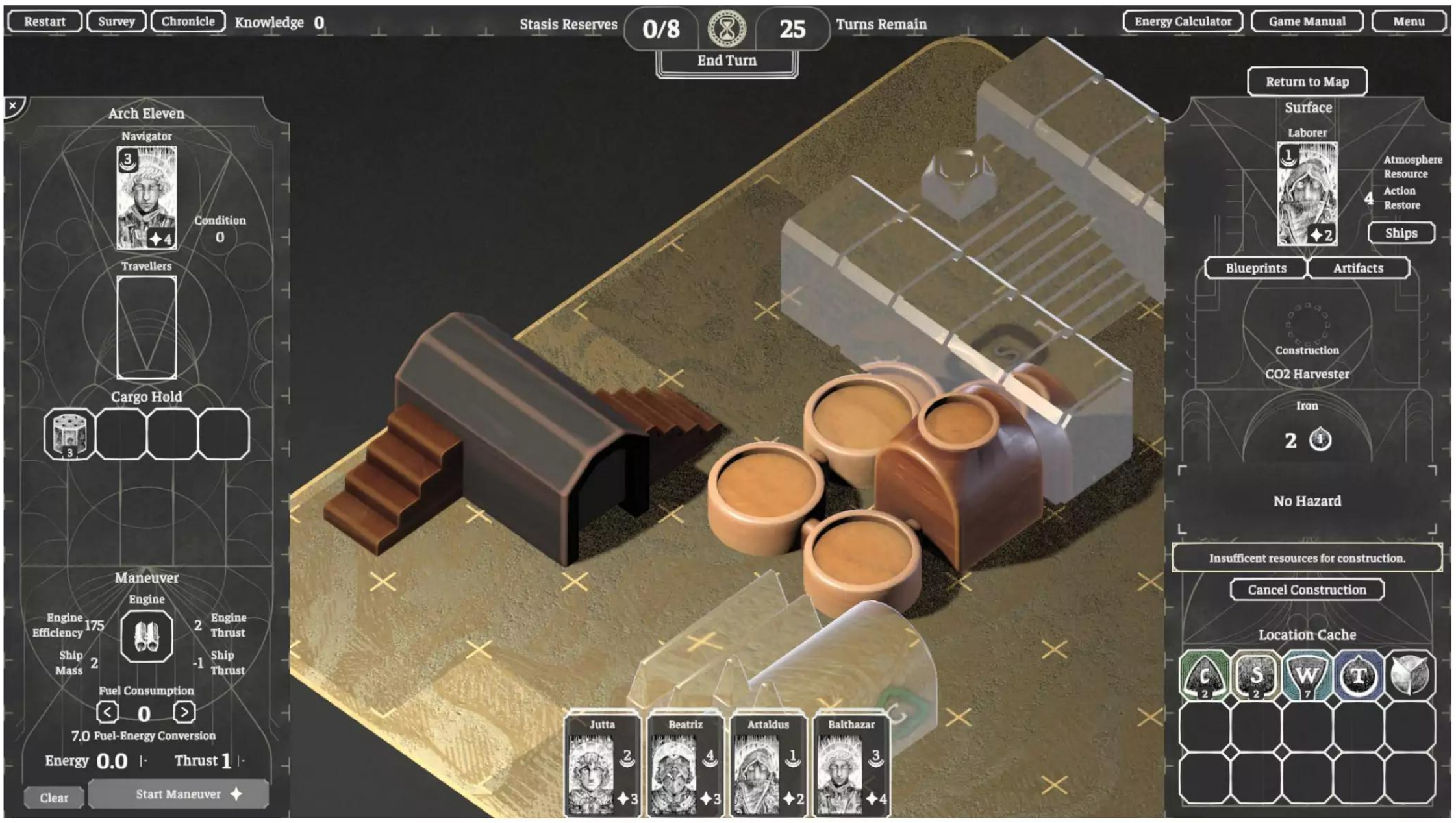
An interstellar strategy that majors in science, maths and fine art

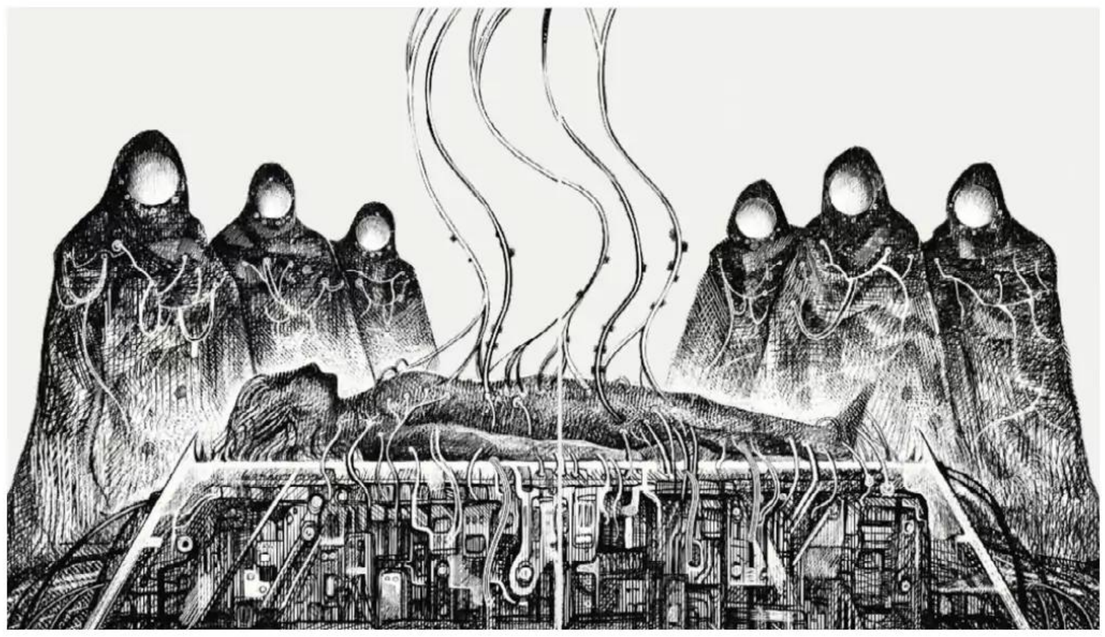
Survival is the name of the game in this run-based strategy from Bithell Games' new label, Lunar Division. In the cold, unforgiving depths of space, you move from solar system to solar system, harvesting what you can before leaving aboard the Vault of the title – a giant, rocket-powered monastery. It says it all about the dreadful situation you're in that the most valuable asset here is stasis: how much you're able to generate determines how many of your crew can hibernate in cryosleep until they reach the next star.

In other words, you're running to stand still – and trying to keep the faith as you do so. This, you see, is your other most prized resource, and, as the old adage goes, it's a fickle thing. When faced with a hazard, such as a hail of meteorites as you approach a planet or a storm sweeping over its surface, the number of dice you roll is governed by the faith stat of the pilot of the ship you've sent out to scavenge.

Such incidents add a delicious layer of unpredictability to a game that otherwise

Artefacts found on planets give you a knowledge resource that allows you to unlock new buildings, ships, abilities and more





TOP LEFT **Though planets are represented in 2D (Flat Earthers will have a field day), the patterns on their surface will slowly shift to visualise their rotation.**
ABOVE **Solar systems are procedurally generated, and throw up a range of satellites, from asteroids to gas giants. The energy calculator give you an at-a-glance view of how much a manoeuvre will cost**

gives you all the information you need to make it safely back and write an entry in the Vault's chronicle (which, even if you manage to complete it, is unlikely to be the happiest of sagas). This is a science-fiction tale that doesn't stint on either part of the equation, underpinned by what we already know about space travel and the universe.

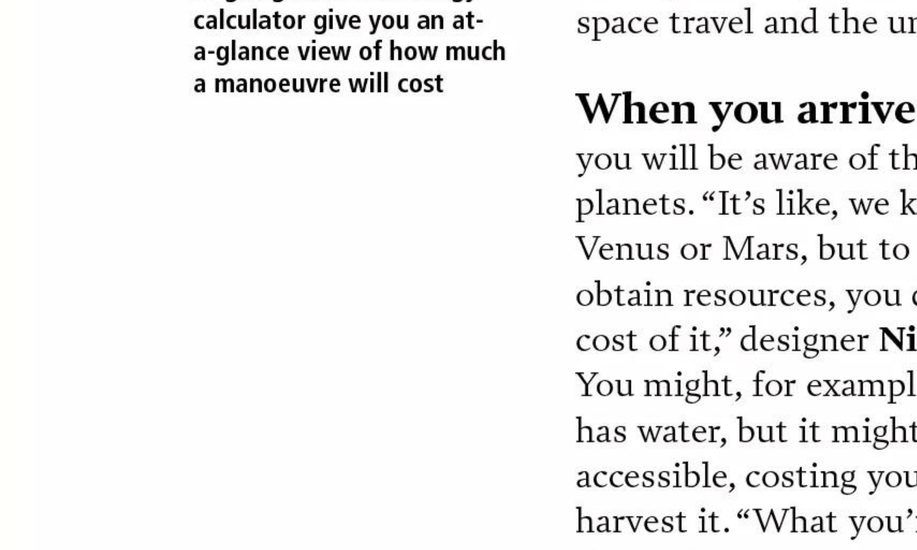
When you arrive in a solar system, then, you will be aware of the relative value of its planets. "It's like, we know the composition of Venus or Mars, but to get there and build and obtain resources, you don't know the final cost of it," designer **Nic Tringali** explains. You might, for example, reach a planet that has water, but it might not be immediately accessible, costing you valuable time to harvest it. "What you're going to get out of the exploration is pretty well known, but the cost of it can be varied and interesting."

Likewise, you'll be aware of how much energy each journey will cost: an in-game calculator takes into account energy efficiency, ship mass and fuel to spit out a value that lets you weigh up whether it's worth trekking to a particular planet. Tringali points to a potential destination on the map to demonstrate. "It takes nine energy to land here because there's a big gravity well, but it only takes, say, five energy to enter into its orbit." It's based on real-world fuel equations, whereby the more fuel you spend, the less efficient it gets. Maximising your fuel consumption, then, requires you to plan two or three moves in advance. Not least because you can't simply pull from a pool of resources: you have to transport everything to where it's required.

There are a lot of factors to consider before each turn, then, but if *The Banished Vault* is dense with ideas and mechanics, it ensures you're never overwhelmed by them: Tringali has written an in-game manual with step-by-step explanations and details for every building and resource. "It's basically what you'd find on a wiki, but it's better laid out," he says. "There's a little tutorial introduction to the world and the game and so on. After that, if you would rather learn by reading the whole manual and then playing, that's fine. If you want to just go play the game, and then look things up as you need it, or if all you ever need is a reference, that's fine, too."

Were this an actual board game, it's one for which you'd pay a premium

The booklet forms part of the game's tabletop-style presentation: this all takes place on a giant energy map, upon which you move – and place down, during the building stage – die-cast pieces, with dice physically rendered as you roll them to decide your fate, and crew members represented as cards. Were this an actual board game, it's one for which you'd pay a premium. The future of this floating space monastery may seem bleak, but from a presentational standpoint, at least, *The Banished Vault* paints a pretty picture. ■



You can spend knowledge to buy new abilities for the characters in hibernation – they can only have one ability each, but existing ones can be replaced

The starting point for Andrey Garin's illustrations, Tringali says, involved considering how an artist within this world might depict events. "It gives the player something different to look at, and it's born out of the same fictional core"

Captain's blog

Tringali has been documenting the game's development via a series of Medium posts – which were, in fact, written before it was announced. It's given him an outlet to talk about a game he's spent long periods developing alone. "I know that isolating feeling when you're on a project for a long time, and just can't talk about it with anybody," he tells us, days after Heart Machine's Alx Preston (p54) says much the same thing. "It feels like you're in a weird cave." It's also enabled Tringali to elaborate on elements a trailer can't fully convey. "It's about signalling the type of game it is to as many people as I can. It's like saying, 'If you're a person who reads patch notes for Paradox games' – which I do – 'then you might enjoy reading this'."

Developer
Un Je Ne Sais Quoi, Umanimation
Publisher
Focus Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Origin France
Release Q2

DORDOGNE

Misty watercolour memories of a childhood summer

The past rarely returns to us in perfect detail. For those of us without photographic memories, at least, watercolour might just be the ideal medium for realising a formative time in our lives. Vivid and evocative, yet at times hazy and indistinct – particularly around the fringes – it's an aesthetic that serves *Dordogne*'s gentle, heartfelt reminiscences particularly well.

It works, too, as an expressive way to depict the present: before protagonist Mimi casts her mind back to a summer spent with grandmother Nora just before she turned 13, she's caught in a torrential downpour, which appears to warp the urban environment around her. The rain seems to be causing the paint itself to run, rendering the precise geometry of buildings as wavy, unfocused shapes. Then, when she's transported to the past, certain images are rendered in muted tones outside her immediate environment; brighter colours flood in around her as she trots down a path, as if representing the narrow focus of all that she can recall.

For Mimi, the past represents a welcome escape during a tough week in which she's lost her job and her grandmother. A letter from Nora's notary sends her back to her house in the Dordogne before it's emptied, per her will – though it's apparent from the

The responses you choose sometimes determine the subject of your reply and on certain occasions the tone

Mimi isn't particularly pleased at having to spend the summer holiday away from her parents and friends, though she soon cheers up

text messages from father Fabrice (Nora's son, from whom she was clearly estranged) that she'll be making the trip alone.

But soon after she puts the key in the door and the sights, sounds and smells of the old house effectively turn it into a time machine, we see that Mimi's younger self isn't much happier than her adult counterpart. Away from family and friends, she sulks her way around this rural idyll – until, tasked with finding some paper to draw on, she stumbles across a binder belonging to Nora and her late husband. Despite its evident sentimental value, she suggests her granddaughter fill the remaining pages; an instant camera and, later, a tape recorder are the tools with which she can document her stay, and so steadily assemble a scrapbook of memories.

It's the narrative setup of Hindsight meets the central mechanic of Season

Broadly speaking, then, it's the narrative setup of *Hindsight* meets the central mechanic of *Season: A Letter To The Future*. As in the latter, you're rewarded for thoroughness by having more choice in how to decorate the binder: stickers can be found as you explore these painterly locales, while key words become lines in short poems that sit next to the photos you take. Exploring the riverbank together, Mimi's grandmother suggests she snaps the hot-air balloons overhead, but you needn't follow her advice. While you can rotate a photo, unlike *Season*, it can't be resized, and that's no complaint. It feels like a truer representation of a kid's scrapbook – tasteful presentation is unlikely to be the most pressing concern for a 12-year-old.

Elsewhere, you'll engage in conversations where you'll get to choose the tone or subject of your response, as well as interactions involving both analogue sticks and face buttons – dragging a cereal box towards your bowl with one 'hand' before pouring it out with the other, for instance, or grabbing a knife to smear butter over a piece of toast. These serve as shrewd ways to bring the place to life, though there's already a sense of flow and movement to the brushstrokes with which these backdrops have been daubed.

The characters, rendered with a crispness that doesn't match their environment, initially threaten to break the game's spell, but you soon acclimatise. Perhaps, if only by happy accident, that says something about the way memory works: the connections we've made with the people we love allow them to appear more clearly through our mind's own viewfinder. Either way, *Dordogne*'s habit of capturing dewy-eyed memories with such clarity and acuity bodes well for the game. ■

***Dordogne* uses a variety of tricks to make its 2D watercolour paintings feel more three-dimensional and alive – in this scene, tiny motes of light hover closer to the screen. And, yes, the toilet is flushable**

Rift apart

Part of *Dordogne*'s success (or otherwise) will ultimately come down to how well it ties past and present. Early on, it already establishes an intriguing subplot: Fabrice's angry texts to Mimi make his feelings abundantly clear, as he tries to dissuade her from visiting Nora's house, describing her belongings as "junk" and telling Mimi "you can't change the past". A letter from the late '70s from Mimi's own mother Helena addressed to Nora demonstrates that, unlike her husband, she had some sympathy for her mother-in-law, outlining her desire for her daughter to have "exciting and meaningful moments with her"

ROUNDUP

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch **Origin** Japan **Release** May 12

Having extended *Breath Of The Wild*'s open world into the skies above Hyrule, Nintendo has also expanded Link's box of tricks. Two of his four new abilities – Ultrahand and Fuse – enable you to combine objects in creative ways that make the crafting systems of most other games seem rather feeble. A Puffshroom mounted on a shield acts serves as a smoke bomb when struck; a long stick can be attached to a pitchfork to jab enemies from afar; logs and fans can be turned into a flying machine or a hovercraft. We'd normally say 'review next issue', but at this rate it'll be *next* May before we're ready to put down these toys.

MASK OF THE ROSE

Developer/publisher Failbetter Games **Format** PC, Switch **Origin** UK **Release** June 8

A minor delay to the release of this visual-novel romance, set in Failbetter's Fallen London universe, coincides with a demo at London game conference WASD. It's the perfect opportunity to remind ourselves why we were so charmed by it in the first place: swoonsome character art and typically sharp writing paired with a breadth of narrative options rarely seen in the genre, where outcomes are informed not only by your dialogue choices but the clothes you wear.

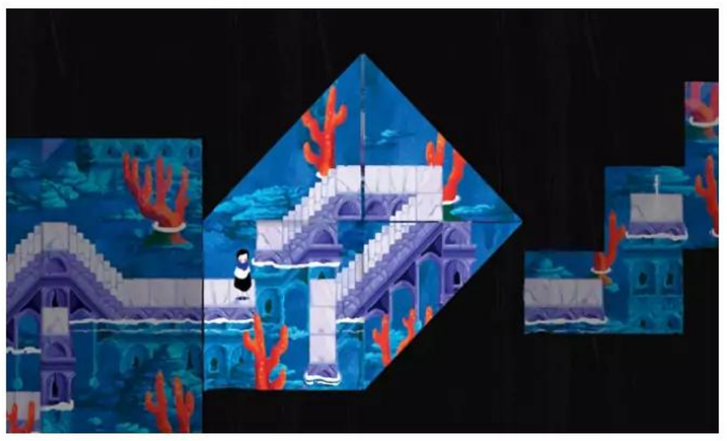
STICK IT TO THE STICKMAN

Developer Free Lives **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Format** PC
Origin South Africa **Release** 2023

This Roguelike brawler updates the visual draw of the '00s wave of stickman action Flash games, making use of tilt-shift effects, dynamic lighting and some sumptuous animation served by an unusual combat system where a preset catalogue of moves are cycled through using a single button.

PAPER TRAIL

Developer/publisher Newfangled Games **Format** Android, iOS, PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Origin** UK **Release** 2023



Anyone who really got to grips with their copy of E378 to discover the secrets of p16–17 within will know the pleasures of manipulating a paper world. So it's pleasing to discover that the big idea of this puzzler – its origami-style folding mechanic – is just as satisfying in play as it was on paper.

GOBLIN STONE

Developer Orc Chop Games **Publisher** Curve Games
Format PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Origin** Philippines
Release 2023 (PC), 2024 (consoles)

In this game equivalent of Mitchell & Webb's 'Are we the baddies?' sketch, a tutorial introduces you to a band of adventurers before flipping the script and giving you control of their goblin prey, who literally punch up in turn-based battles that recall *Darkest Dungeon*'s side-on approach to tactics.

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#384

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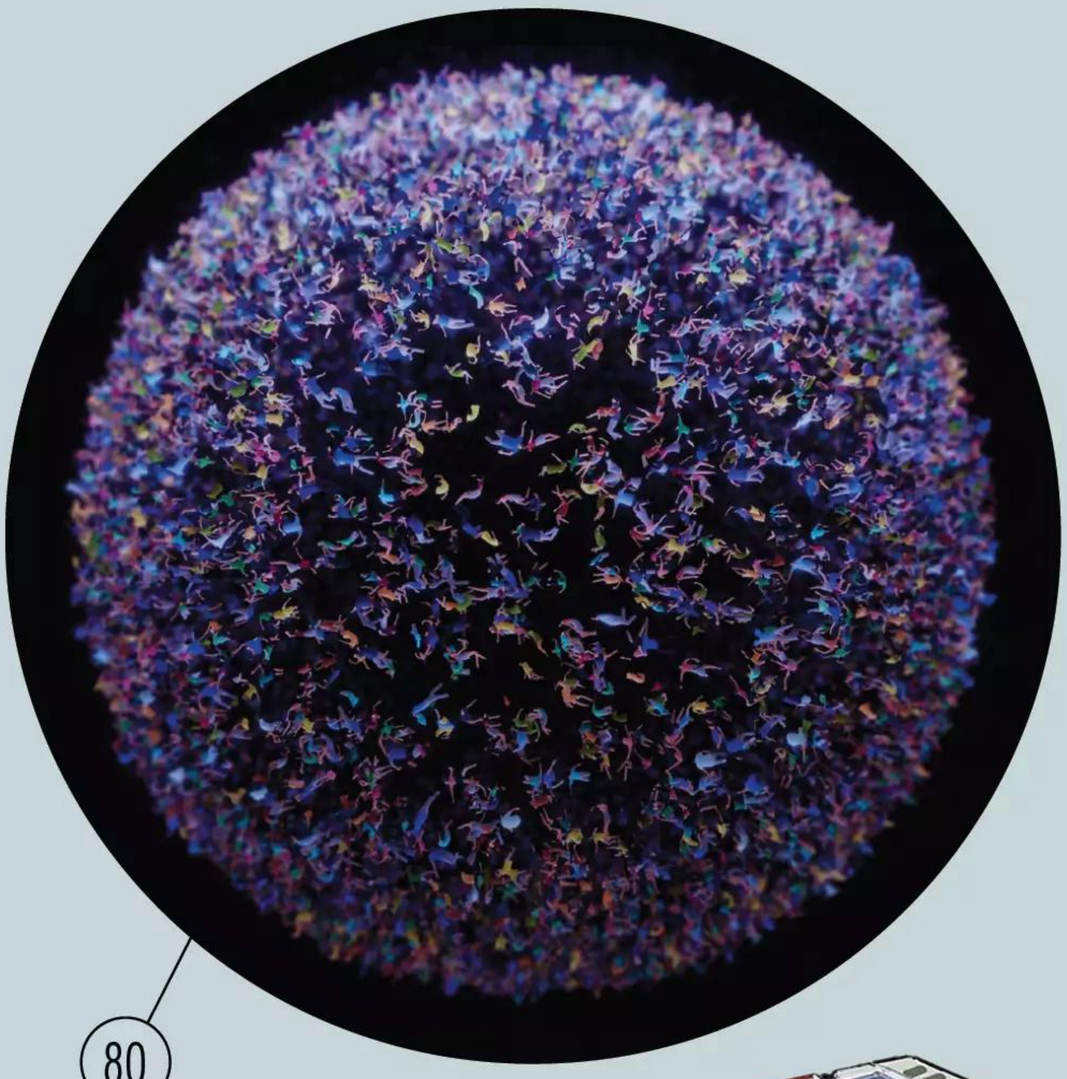

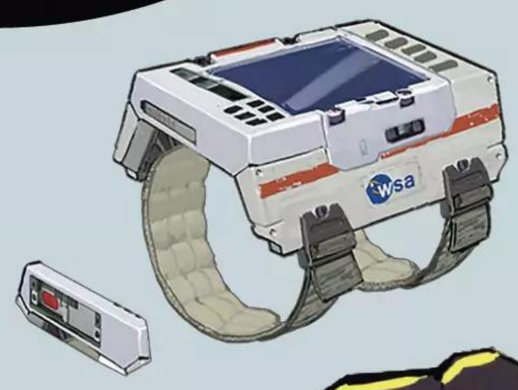

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BUILT D

Game Hyper Light Breaker
Developer Heart Machine
Publisher Gearbox Publishing
Format PC
Release 2023

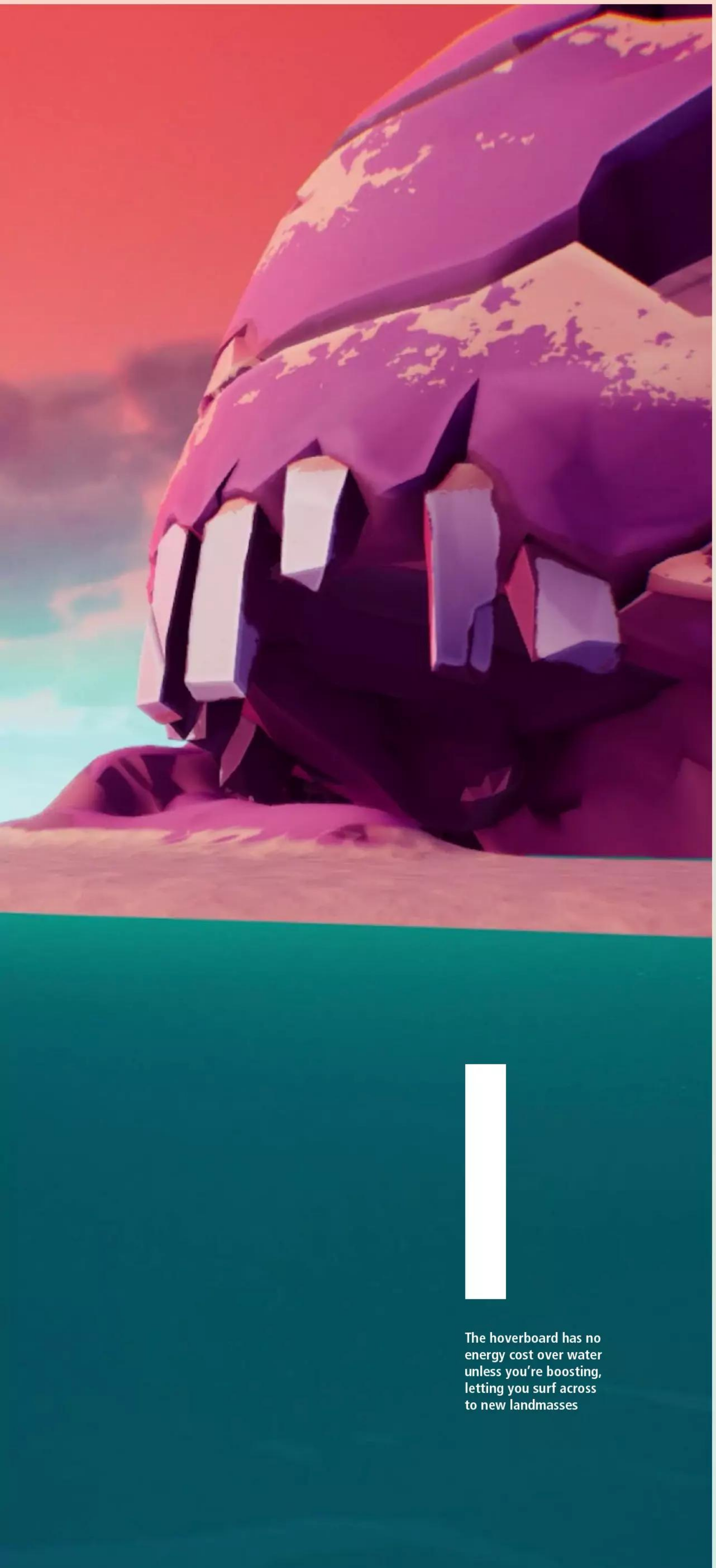
I

DIFFERENT

How Heart Machine's Hyper Light sequel is breaking new ground for the open-world Roguelike

By Chris Schilling

BUILT DIFFERENT



The hoverboard has no energy cost over water unless you're boosting, letting you surf across to new landmasses

The city seems quiet and tranquil from here. Stepping out onto the balcony, a slender masked figure with cerulean hair, a short red jacket and a long tail takes in the view of a part of this metropolis they'll never visit, its houses, hotels and skyscrapers at once so close yet so far away. Peering through the aquamarine haze, the Blu – one of several humanoid species in this world – glances to the right where a vast waterfall emerges from a flourishing mass of greenery. Heading back inside, they trot around a plush lobby, itself not short of plant life. There are vendors and other NPCs here, but no one is demanding the Blu's attention. A soothing ambient score, noticeable but not obtrusive, sustains the peaceful vibe as they head outside, toward a vast elevator, bathed in pink light.

Down below, it's a very different story. This is the Overgrowth, a sprawling land fragmented into disparate biomes. Stepping off the platform onto the surface, the Blu – as piloted by Heart Machine's **Alx Preston** – immediately breaks into a jog before dashing once, twice, three times, each sudden burst briefly producing a trail of brightly hued spectral clones. Pulling out a hoverboard, they skate and boost through a patch of lavender-coloured grass, before wall-dashing and double-jumping up to higher ground where a threat suddenly comes into view. Pulling out their sidearm, they pump five rounds into the first enemy; the second suddenly flips onto its side and rolls at high speed toward them, firing a spray of lurid pink projectiles of its own. Staggering back from the hit, the Blu advances, swinging a blade of light back and forth, refilling their gun's chamber, which finishes the job. It takes a moment to identify the creatures they just defeated: yes, in the world of *Hyper Light Breaker*, even the *snails* are deadly.

The dichotomy couldn't be more stark, but then Heart Machine's third release is a game of surprising contrasts. Its setting is a delicate balance of hand-crafted and procedural elements, fused together to form what Preston hopes will be a "seamless" open world. Yet it's one that has been deliberately built on foundations that are anything but solid, because *Hyper Light Breaker* is also a Roguelike, one with some measure of persistence, but where death means the Overgrowth will be different on your next excursion. On the face of things, the promotional logline – "infinite open worlds" – seems vaguely daunting, as likely to put off as many as it attracts. (We think of the familiar maxim about open-world games, and how it might apply here: "See those mountains? You can go there – and maybe you should, because they won't be there next time.") It's not inaccurate in the sense that this place is different every single time, but it perhaps sounds more appealing to describe it as the 3D *Hyper Light Drifter* sequel most of us thought Heart Machine would make next. ▶

Preston: "Why does the world shift and change every time you go to it? That's part of the narrative. The fabric of the core conceit is woven back into the story, so it never feels separated from that. Every element should be justified"

It's a delicate blend of hand-crafted and procedural elements, fused to form what Preston hopes will be a "seamless" open world

Certainly it's not too far away from the platonic ideal of a game we've had in our heads for the best part of seven years, ever since we finished Heart Machine's electrifying debut. If it feels longer ago than that, partly it's because that game cast such a long shadow, and partly because its aura of mystery lingered after the credits rolled – no matter how thoroughly you seemed to explore it, its world seemed to hold further secrets beyond your understanding. To put it another way, it never fully resolved itself, and there is a similarly alluring air of mystique about this followup. Admittedly, that's partly because there's plenty the developer isn't prepared to tell us yet, and because some elements haven't been pinned down. Indeed, the game won't be finished upon its initial release, though we'll get to why it's launching in Early Access later. But it's perhaps also because it calls back to the original in a number of obvious ways, from its vibrant visual palette to its instantly recognisable sound effects. The chime that sounds when Blu passes by an object or person they can interact with (and the followup when you hold a button to confirm the action) provokes a sensation that feels alarmingly like nostalgia.

As Preston subsequently introduces mission handler PB, we note she communicates with you via comic-book panels, as characters did in *Drifter*. "We don't have any written or verbal dialogue," he says. "It's all done through panels, but there's a *lot* more of them, and a lot more character progression." That's partly achieved by completing missions: this urban hub will steadily expand and improve, each successful quest helping increase the population and establish it as a settlement. This is, Preston explains, your primary goal as a 'breaker' – think of each trip into the Overgrowth like a playthrough in *Hades*, and the hub as a respite between runs, one that develops over time much as the House Of Hades does. Here, as there, you pick your breaker's loadout from an arsenal that grows in power and variety in accordance with the resources and materials you bring back with you, before setting off on the long trip down once more.

Though there are secrets to find as you explore the world, from rare drops to hidden NPCs and underground labs hosting various challenges, as in *Drifter* you're rarely far from your next fight. Combat in a 3D space is very different, of course, to fighting from a top-down view. "You don't have that same perspective where you can see everything coming at you at a moment's notice," Preston notes. "And then mix in the fact that things can be coming at you in a randomised environment, and it creates scenarios that involve very different considerations: you have to manage the camera and telegraph things better in some instances, and there are a lot of different behavioural considerations for the AI that, in *Drifter*, were a lot more simple." Even so, these encounters have a familiar rhythm: as before, your sidearm (or rail) has a limited amount of energy ammunition, and the chamber can only be refilled by landing hits with your melee ▶

HYBRID HEAVEN

Experimenting with the concept of combining the open-world and Roguelike genres has been a fascinating process, Preston says. "It's like: what do you care about in an open world? What's the value of this format, of this structure? And how do you distil that down into its most important features, where it is in some ways at odds with [a Roguelike]?" It's clear the two aren't entirely incompatible; as he notes, exploration can be a key part of a Roguelike even when the genre tends to focus on room-to-room combat. "Discovery and exploration can become its own progression metric, rather than just 'I made it to the next room'. It's: 'What did I collect here, and what did I discover in this biome, and what secrets did I unearth, or uncover?' The fact that it's got this open world and that there's a reset on it, and you have to make the best of it otherwise lose out on what it *is*, ultimately, is really compelling."

In the build we're shown, there are more than 50 enemy variants, belonging to 20+ distinct archetypes. These humanoid opponents (right) are among the more deadly of the threats you'll face, particularly after the sun has risen and set a few times and they've levelled up accordingly

It calls back to the original in a number of obvious ways, from its vibrant visual palette to its instantly recognisable sound effects

BUILT DIFFERENT

This urban hub will steadily expand and improve, each successful quest helping increase the population and establish it as a settlement

DEAD RISING

As Supergiant did for *Hades*, Preston has been thinking a lot about how what he calls "functional immortality" works in the world of *Hyper Light Breaker*. In other words, there will be a narrative reason behind the way characters can die and be resurrected – though since some of the major threats you'll face in the world are reborn from fallen breakers, we wonder if, in fact, it's the same character you return as once you fall? It's too early to answer that question, as is the rationale behind the way the world itself reshuffles after you perish. "A big part of the mystery is like, why is the land always changing and shifting? Everything needs to be justified in the world – like, it can't just be a hand wave of 'Oh, because videogames'. That's part of the story – with the games we're making, I feel that *every* mechanic needs to make sense within that world. And the mysteries behind them are worth exploring."

The game's playable characters, Preston tells us, will come with a predefined class, which you'll eventually be able to swap out

weapon. Both your health and your ammo are represented diegetically, displayed by the floating drone that follows you around throughout, another holdover from the earlier game.

Encounters are a little looser and less exacting than in *Drifter*, where it felt like every strike had to be judged with great care and precision, but as the Blu dashes hither and yon, darting between a string of opponents and alternating between ranged and close-quarters attacks, it feels as if Heart Machine has found a way to successfully translate *Drifter*'s combat into a 3D world. Just as we're scribbling down a note that there's perhaps a hint of PlatinumGames in there, too, Preston makes a similar observation: *Nier: Automata* is the reference he offers up, and when a thin, curved katana is introduced, shortly before another burst of bullet-hell ordnance from a larger opponent, we see *Breaker* is very much in the same ballpark. There are parries and combos here, too, and as Preston ducks out of the way of an incoming bullet we hear a satisfying *fwoom* as the action briefly slows.

There are plenty of similarities, then, but a number of key differences, too. One of the biggest is the relative amount of space you have. When triggering the beacons that you need to activate to unlock the way to the boss of this first biome, energy barriers rise up to keep you hemmed in until you've defeated a wave of grunts (or a helmeted, cape-wearing mini-boss, of which Preston makes swift work), but you never have to worry about dashing off the edge of a platform or finding yourself caught on scenery. Out in the wider world, of course, you can simply run away from danger if you're low on health or in a hurry, but Heart Machine has introduced a mechanical twist to incentivise fight over flight, and it's an idea with its roots in perhaps the finest open-world game of recent years.

Breath Of The Wild's influence can be seen elsewhere in *Hyper Light Breaker*, not least in the glider you can pull out when leaping off cliffs (and, indeed, the circular energy gauge that limits its use). But it's most apparent when night falls in the Overgrowth – though the blazing red sky here puts Nintendo's Blood Moon to shame. An ominous onscreen message warns us that the abyss king is rising, and that the threat level has grown concomitantly: previously defeated enemies now respawn in powered-up form. Suddenly, the Blu is assaulted by a variety of opponents, from bandits to green slimes to bats with dangling tendrils and single unblinking eyes. If you want to boost your own stats to make it a fairer fight, you'll need to gain experience – which, naturally, means standing your ground as often as you dare. That's easier said and done by the next level increase, where a towering brute arrives, swinging its muscular arms and stomping the ground, forcing you to dash clear of its impact radius. Those snails, meanwhile, are back and more aggressive than ever, this time leaving a lime-green toxic slime trail behind them as they roll toward you. As the sun peeks up above the horizon, a message (possibly placeholder; we're frequently reminded to ignore the UI in this early build) gleefully announces that the 'safety of day' has returned. But in a place such as this, that's all relative: you might be in less danger during daylight hours but, as Preston proves when briefly setting down his controller to look out from a rocky outcrop only to be almost immediately struck from behind, it's rare that you can stop and take in the views – unless, that is, you double-jump and wall-dash your way to a place only your breaker can reach.

With the third beacon down, Preston moves on to tackle the biome's boss. Set within the ruins of an empty church, the Blu faces off against a large vulpine warrior sporting a glittering crown of gold draped over a blindfold, and wielding an oversized blade. Needless to say, the remaining wooden pews don't last long. Leaping and swiping with a speed that belies its size, it comes with the traditional lengthy health bar, which is steadily whittled away with the help of the frag grenades and special attack (which in this case summons a giant cube that can be dropped on an opponent's head) that round out the breaker's loadout. Here, Preston brings out a heavier blade of his own, having previously picked up a triple-shot rail. What follows carries more than a passing resemblance to a FromSoft boss fight, albeit one that plays out at a faster pace, with the slashing and dodging accompanied by agile phase-dashes and the occasional rat-a-tat of a rifle. Upon defeat, the boss drops an electronic chip that offers a selection of three perks: one that boosts your critical chances after each kill, another causing damage to your attacker when struck, and one that converts grenade damage into battery power.

While some of the perks you gain will doubtless relate to your breaker's movement, this is another indication of a shift away from the traversal-led focus of *Solar Ash* and towards *Drifter*'s more combat-heavy approach. That makes sense, of course, for a return to the *Hyper Light* universe – and it would be wrong to regard this as a response to the relatively muted (though still broadly positive) reception that greeted Heart Machine's second game. It's clear as we talk to Preston that *Solar Ash* was an important release for the studio for a variety of reasons, not least because it's apparent from the quick dashes and double jumps and hoverboard tricks that one of the aims is to make the process of moving around the Overgrowth intrinsically enjoyable. Besides, just as you see pieces of the old world jutting through here, the bones of the procedural tech Heart Machine spent years building and fine-tuning for *Solar Ash* have formed the foundations for *Breaker*'s own sandbox.

We ask Preston whether, when making *Solar Ash*, he already had the idea for a *Hyper Light* sequel in the back of his mind. In some respects, that game felt like the studio proving to itself that it could build a different kind of open-world game, and *Breaker* feels like both an expansion and a refinement of that. A bunch of enemies show up just as we finish talking, giving him time to think about his answer as he carves through ▶

BUILT DIFFERENT

"We end up showing off stuff that'll definitely be incomplete, but hopefully compelling enough that people want to continue to play"

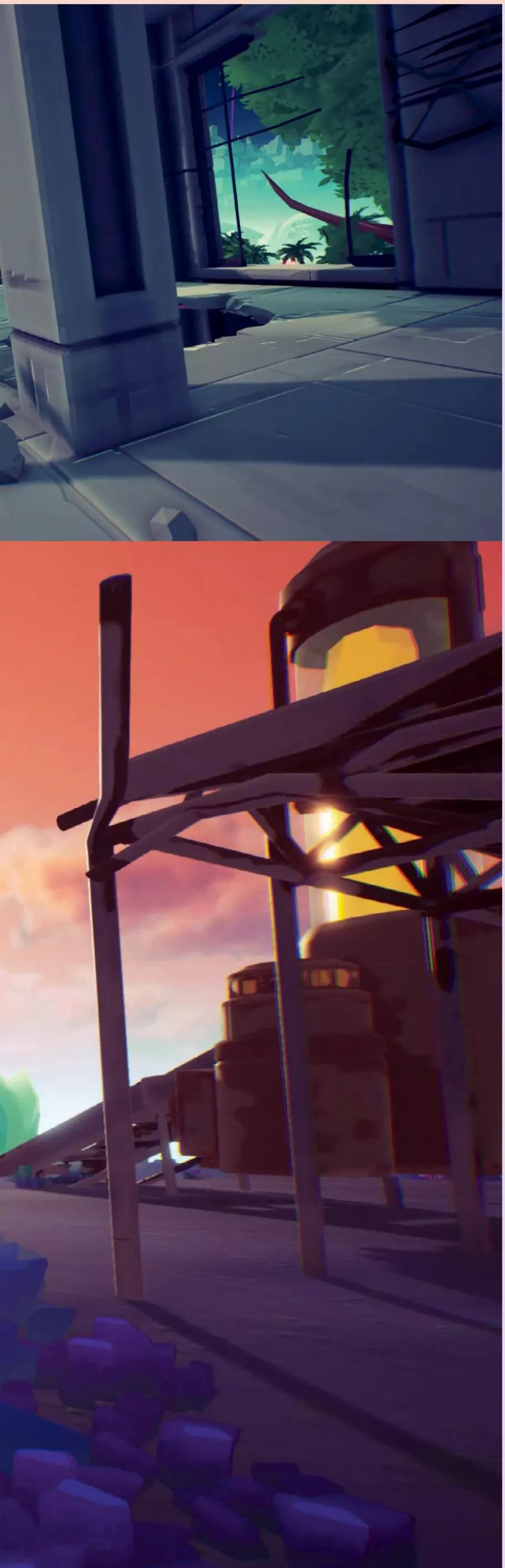
them. "I had certain things in mind for a followup to [*Drifter*] that we might do for a few years," he begins. "Taking this form isn't *precisely* what I had in mind, but definitely inklings of it. And for *Solar Ash*, we're building again on the tech that we've been building on for several years now. It's like, we're in Unreal, we've built up an array of cool things we can do, like character controls and whatever else that worked well for us."

What, then, were the most important lessons he learned from working on the previous game? He pauses in thought once more. "I feel like there's like a million little lessons that you end up learning throughout every game's development cycle," he says eventually. "And so for this game, transitioning from *Solar* to this one – [it was] just thinking a lot about our world in depth, and how we can leverage the tech that we're building longer term and shorter term to make our lives a little easier." The process partly involved figuring out how to speed up the development cycle. *Solar Ash* was half a decade well spent in a lot of ways, establishing a lot of the technical groundwork that has allowed the team to flesh out the Overgrowth much more quickly. But having spent "five years in a cave", Preston was keen to release something publicly sooner this time.

As such, the game will launch into Early Access later this year – giving Heart Machine the opportunity to gauge the player response and iterate upon that instead of plugging away for years on end without any sort of external feedback. "One of the big things that I wanted to change about how we were doing things was having a more open development cycle," Preston admits. "This way, we get to share it with people and have a structure that will accommodate that type of open development, so we can talk about it every couple of years instead of every half a decade, essentially, when we're ready to put a game out."

He says there are pros and cons to both approaches. Developing behind closed doors means you can present a game in its best possible form, only showing it off when it's ready to *be* shown. But, he says, it feels more welcoming to invite people in earlier – today's players have plenty of experience with Early Access and are happy to accept works in progress, understanding that certain elements will be unfinished. "In a way, it's going back to some of our roots that we had with *Drifter*," he says, referring to the crowdfunding process which allowed Heart Machine to keep the game's supporters updated regularly. "Every month, we'd do write-ups and things like that about the status of the game over two and a half years of development. And so it's kind of a similar vibe here, where we end up showing off stuff that'll definitely be incomplete, but hopefully compelling enough that people want to continue to play through and give feedback and all that stuff – to see the busted and the non-busted things [together] and still want to stay on that road."

There is, of course, one more key part of the equation: multiplayer. We don't get to see it in action here (though the skippable 60-second countdown before a run starts is obviously the point at which ▶



BREAKING BOARD

Though the Overgrowth hasn't been built with fluid traversal at top of mind, Heart Machine wanted to make it enjoyable to navigate, and given its size, Preston understood that you'd need a way to move around quicker rather than trekking between destinations exclusively on foot. "Any good open world worth its salt has at least a decent mode of faster transportation," he says. "For me, in particular, it's like, yeah, I want to do something fun while I'm just racing around – just mash a button on a horse and whip its [flanks] or something to burst forward." But he felt the studio could do something better than a generic mount. Hence the hoverboard. "We're doing tricks and boosts and fun things like that, going into the water – there's a lot more we have planned with the hoverboard eventually, on a long enough timeline. But for now we have a core version of that, where the physicality of it is very important to your motion – it should *feel* good."

The game's musical score has similarities to those of *Hyper Light Drifter* and *Solar Ash*, but it doesn't seem as if Rich 'Disasterpeace' Vreeland will return this time. "We have multiple composers," is all Preston is prepared to say for the moment

other breakers can select their loadout before joining in), but Preston says the connection between solo and online play will be "pretty seamless", comparing it to *Destiny* and *Phantasy Star Online*. "It's kind of a similar vibe to those," he says. "You can do these things alone, or you can do them together. There's pros and cons to hanging out with your buddies and doing runs. There's going to be some differences as you bring in people, but as far as story progression and your progression goes, that won't be affected." The changes, then, are largely what you'd expect: enemies have more health points and deal more damage, but there will be some behavioural differences in the AI as they scale up in accordance with the size of your breaker squad.

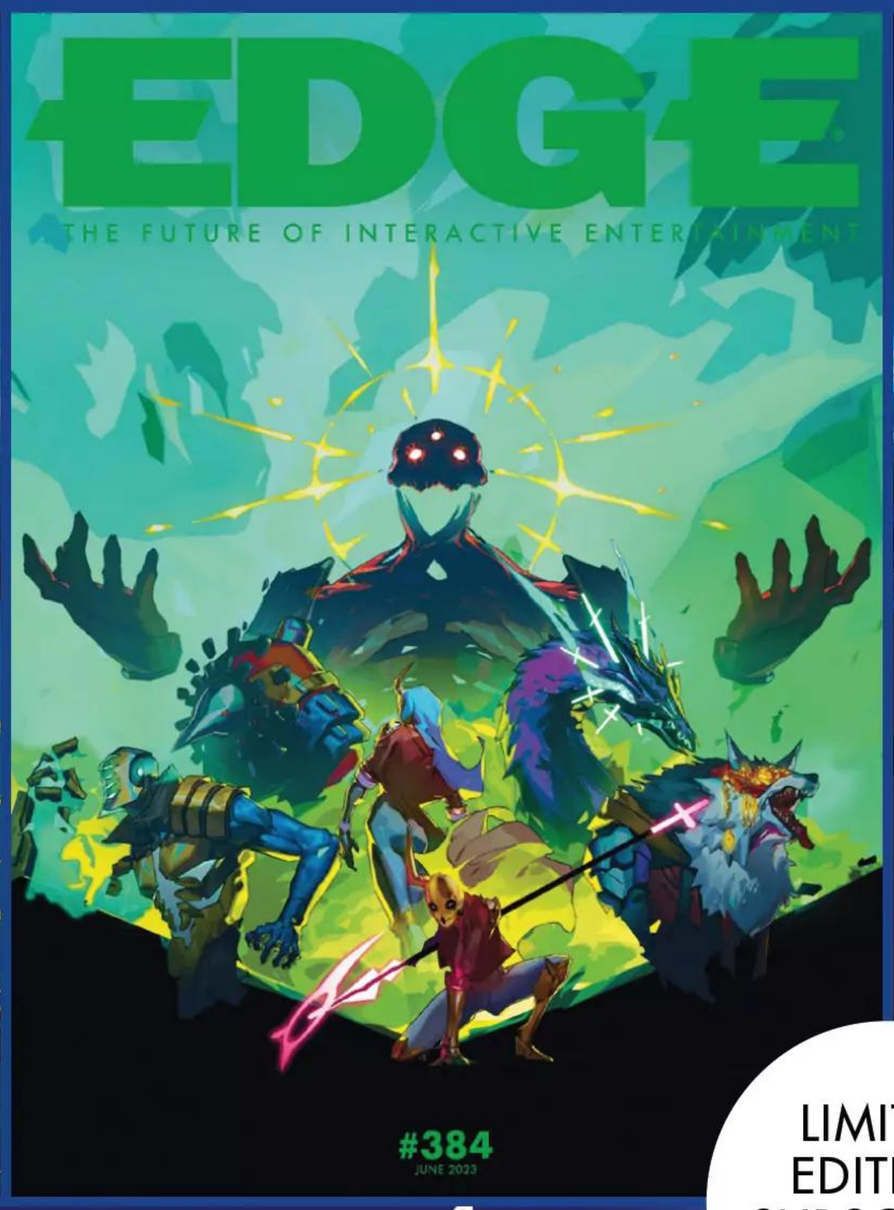
All of which explains why this is not simply *Hyper Light Drifter 2*. For all that it borrows from the original game, you never feel like a nomadic future ronin here: whether you're with friends, or playing solo – meeting NPCs in the Overgrowth or hanging out with the other breakers in the hub – the original game's powerful sense of solitude is absent. That reflects *Breaker*'s more open development process, and yet at the same time it still feels as if Heart Machine is ploughing a lonely furrow, trying to break new ground in two genres (the open-world game and the Roguelike) that have become increasingly crowded.

The challenge of meshing two very different types of game – genres that, in some respects, seem fundamentally incompatible – is daunting, but it's one Preston is clearly relishing. Likewise, finding the sweet spot between bespoke and procedural design. "It's important to find that balance where [the world] is not just open for the sake of being open, you know?" he says. "And even with a procedural game, good level design is super-important to us. It's just a different way of thinking about level design, [involving] algorithms and math. You can still achieve good level design this way. Obviously it isn't a purely curated experience like you're gonna get in *Drifter*. It's just a different structure and format. And that's why we went with something more open in the first place – it was to kind of embrace that reality."

In other words, for all that *Breaker* grounds itself firmly in the *Hyper Light* universe, for all the ideas it takes and tweaks from *Drifter*, it doesn't really feel like a sequel to that game. It's closer, in some respects, to the kind of leap that took us from *Super Mario World* to *Super Mario 64*. It won't – and could never – have the same pioneering impact, but it feels like both a spiritual successor and a thrilling original. A game that finds its own personality through the tensions and contrasts between its disparate parts. "It's not trying to be [another *Drifter*]," Preston says. "It's bringing elements over from that game and even from *Solar Ash* in some ways, but it's doing its own thing, and for good reason. Because ultimately we wanted to try out this unique format and structure that nobody else is doing, and make our own subgenre for this stuff. And we're doing it pretty successfully." ■

The release date isn't set in stone just yet – while it's launching in Early Access, Preston is cognisant that this is going to be a particularly crowded year: "We're going to judge the landscape of things and put it out there when we find a good spot"

"You can do these things alone, or you can do them together. There's pros and cons to hanging out with your buddies and doing runs"



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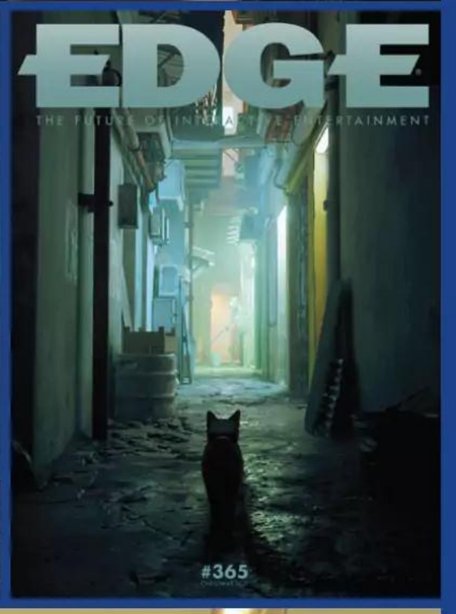

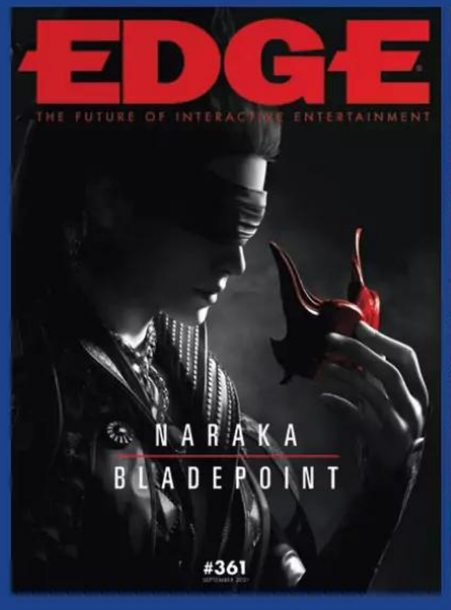

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Can Netflix become a game-publishing powerhouse to match its ambitions in TV and film?

By Alex Spencer

Nobody could have been especially surprised by the news, in November 2021, that Netflix was officially launching its own videogame division. The company made its first attempt at a Stranger Things tie-in game back in 2017, after all, and has been experimenting with interactive video since Black Mirror spin-off *Bandersnatch* and a repurposed version of Telltale's *Minecraft: Story Mode* hit the service in 2018. More recently it's enjoyed success with TV adaptations of videogame series, most notably The Witcher. And so, coming at a time when Netflix was starting to shed subscribers (numbers dropped by around 1.2 million in the first half of 2022, though this since seems to have turned around), the attempt to push into a new medium makes sense. The sheer speed at which its new division has grown in the space of less than 18 months, though, has been considerably more surprising.

Today, Netflix Games comprises 450 people, including six in-house development studios, four of them acquired (Next Games, Boss Fight Entertainment, Night School Studio and Spry Fox) and two built from the ground up, in Helsinki and California. These studios are yet to bear fruit, but in the meantime a string of partnerships with thirdparty developers has kept the service well fed. At the time of writing, there are 55 games available through Netflix, with another 40 planned for release in 2023. Including those games, the company has greenlit a total of 70 thirdparty and 16 in-house titles yet to be released. Most of them remain under wraps – though we do know they include Night School's *Oxenfree II*, a tie-in to Netflix's Vikings: Valhalla series, and an *Assassin's Creed* game from Ubisoft – but the current selection suggests we should expect a broad spread. ▶

RIGHT **The original *Valiant Hearts* was initially a PC and console release in 2014, coming to mobile a few months later. Sequel *Coming Home*, though, is a mobile exclusive (at least for now)**

ABOVE **The acquisition of Night School Studios, in September 2021, was one of the first real signs of Netflix's gaming ambitions. *Oxenfree II* (pictured) will be published this year.**
RIGHT ***Immortality* might be best experienced with a controller in hand, but we'll always welcome one of 2022's finest games being made available 'free' to millions of players**

Its existing catalogue includes versions of games licensed from mobile powerhouse Gameloft, including *Asphalt Xtreme* and *Country Friends*, along with fresh mobile ports of indie darlings such as *Immortality*, *Spiritfarer* and *Into The Breach* – in the latter case, in an expanded form that apparently would never have existed without Netflix's involvement. There are also what we might term 'Netflix Originals': titles such as *Poinpy*, *Lucky Luna*, *Desta: The Memories Between* and Ubisoft's recent *Valiant Hearts* sequel that are only available with a Netflix subscription. Most successful of all are adaptations of Netflix's own TV properties. According to analyst Omdia (working with figures from Sensor Tower), these accounted for a third of all downloads in Netflix Games' first year, and the selection ranges from a number of Stranger Things games to a dating

Leanne Loombe, Netflix VP and head of external games

"OUR VISION IS TO BUILD A SELECTION OF GAMES TO SERVE ALL OF THE MEMBERS THAT WE HAVE"

sim that accompanied the third season of celibacy-testing reality show Too Hot To Handle.

It's an eclectic bunch, then, as underlined by a recent press conference, which wandered from a sober look at *Valiant Hearts: Coming Home*'s representation of the human cost of war to a trailer for *Too Hot To Handle* in which stars of the dating show enthuse about the option to give their in-game avatars bigger breasts, and pose the immortal question: "Can I customise the peen?" Yet while our instinct when faced with a new publisher might be to look for a common thread, in the case of Netflix Games that disparity is kind of the point.

In part, it's a classic case of spread betting. As Netflix VP and head of external games **Leanne Loombe** admits, "Not everything we launch will be a hit". But it's more than just a way of mitigating failure, she tells us. "Our vision is to really have a game on Netflix for everyone. And I don't mean one game that everybody plays, but more building a selection of games to serve all of the members that we have, with enough variety and diversity that anyone can find a game that they can enjoy." This makes sense in the broader context of Netflix's catalogue. It's not chasing a single demographic with its television or film output, so why should we expect it to in games?

The diversity Netflix is after extends not just to genre or aesthetic (which is certainly the case in a library that includes both *Immortality* and a Hello Kitty rhythm game) but also to the shape of games on offer, Loombe explains. "Is it something that they want to play every day? Or is it a more completable experience that they can spend a weekend going through in four or six hours, like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* [*Shredder's Revenge*]?"

NET GAINS

Faisal Sethi, CEO and founder, Frosty Pop

There is one thing these games do all have in common, though: their format. For now, Netflix is purely a mobile publisher, releasing its games on the Android and iOS app stores. "It's not the sole focus, longterm," Loombe clarifies. "The longterm vision is that you'll be able to play games wherever Netflix is. But mobile, I think, is a great place for us to start." Mobile is the fastest-growing segment of games, she points out, well ahead of console or PC. It's also home to considerably shorter development cycles, something that aligned well with Netflix Games' initial priority of, as Loombe puts it, "speed to market".

The current state of mobile gaming also lends Netflix Games a clear selling point, like Apple Arcade before it. "I think we have a great opportunity with mobile *because* of how challenging the free-to-play market has become to navigate," Loombe says. The subscription model helps with discovery of games, and eliminates the need for ads, in-app purchases, and the monetisation hooks that come alongside. This is a benefit not just for players, Loombe notes, but also the developers with whom she works. "We're creating the environment for our developers to just focus on making the best version of their game, without having to worry about the constraints of monetisation, or changing their game design to appease [the requirements of in-app purchases], or ads, or having to worry about LTV [lifetime value] or CPI [cost per install] and having that as the grounding to what they're trying to accomplish. When you remove all of that, it's all about creativity."

It's a sentiment echoed by the developers we approach to discuss their work with Netflix – of which there might be none with more experience than Frosty Pop. The small Canadian dev has already released five games through Netflix, ranging from *This Is A True Story*, an educational RPG made in collaboration with Charity: Water, to *Krispee Street*, a Where's Wally-ish hidden-object game based on a webcomic. "Discovery is a perpetual issue in games," says Frosty Pop CEO and founder **Faisal Sethi** – but never more than here and now, as "app stores are ballooning with content". This, then, is at least a partial solution. "Subscription services, perhaps as a consequence of being a nascent market, simply have fewer games for players to explore and discover," Sethi says. "They also have existing, loyal audiences that are substantial in number [and] afford a level of curation that traditional app stores simply cannot." And, of course, a guaranteed source of cash.

Developers are understandably hesitant to talk about the financial specifics, though Netflix confirms its deals consist of a flat fee, in some cases also covering development costs. Sethi suggests that its games would have been released somehow, regardless of whether they got the Netflix greenlight, but that's not the case for every game on the service. When we speak with Subset Games co-founder and programmer **Matthew Davis** about *Into The Breach: Advanced Edition*, which was released in July of last year, he puts it simply: "We wouldn't have a mobile version without Netflix." A mobile port of the game had been a consideration for Davis and Justin Ma, the other half of Subset – their debut, *FTL*, had made the leap to iOS successfully – but they weren't sure whether "it would actually justify the development fees and time spent to make that work, because it's not a trivial process."

It wasn't just the mobile version that this deal made possible. After *Into The Breach*, Davis and Ma started work on an expansion in the manner of *FTL*'s own *Advanced Edition*. "We worked on it for maybe six months to a year, and then we shelved it because… um, I honestly don't have a good answer. It just wasn't working out – something about it wasn't exciting us. We wanted to work on something different, and so we set it aside." After being approached by Netflix about a mobile port, years later, Davis and Ma couldn't resist blowing the dust off their old ideas. "And then it all got a bit out of hand, and turned into more of an actual full content release than we'd originally intended."

THE SUBSCRIPTION MODEL ELIMINATES THE NEED FOR ADS, IN-APP PURCHASES AND MONETISATION

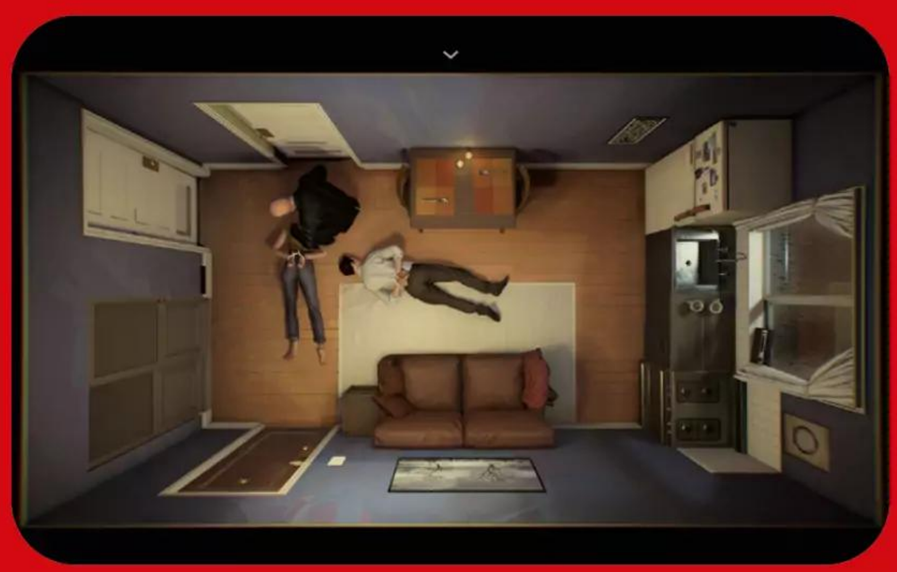
As well as launching through Netflix on Android and iOS, *Advanced Edition* was a free update for all other formats. Its new elements might only have been built because of Netflix's involvement but, Davis insists, exclusivity wasn't a concern. "They were thrilled to have us incorporating extra content and happy to support us launching it on all the platforms," he says. "It was a big part of our initial agreement to work with Netflix that they would have the mobile stuff, but anything that happened outside of mobile, we would retain full control over." And this deal was one that suited Subset nicely. "At least we don't have to worry about the marketing nightmare that is mobile."

The ability to handle this side of things is a major part of Netflix's appeal, especially to teams as small as Subset. "Making games is really hard," Loombe says, adding that her team's job is ultimately to "make [developers'] lives easier wherever we can, so that they can focus on just making the best version of their game. And then we'll deal with all the other shit that comes with making games." In theory, anyway. "That's not always possible," she admits, "especially as we're starting out – I think we're still a little bit rough around the edges. Not everything is all squared away."

Some of the "other shit" is what you might expect from a traditional videogame publisher, including QA and

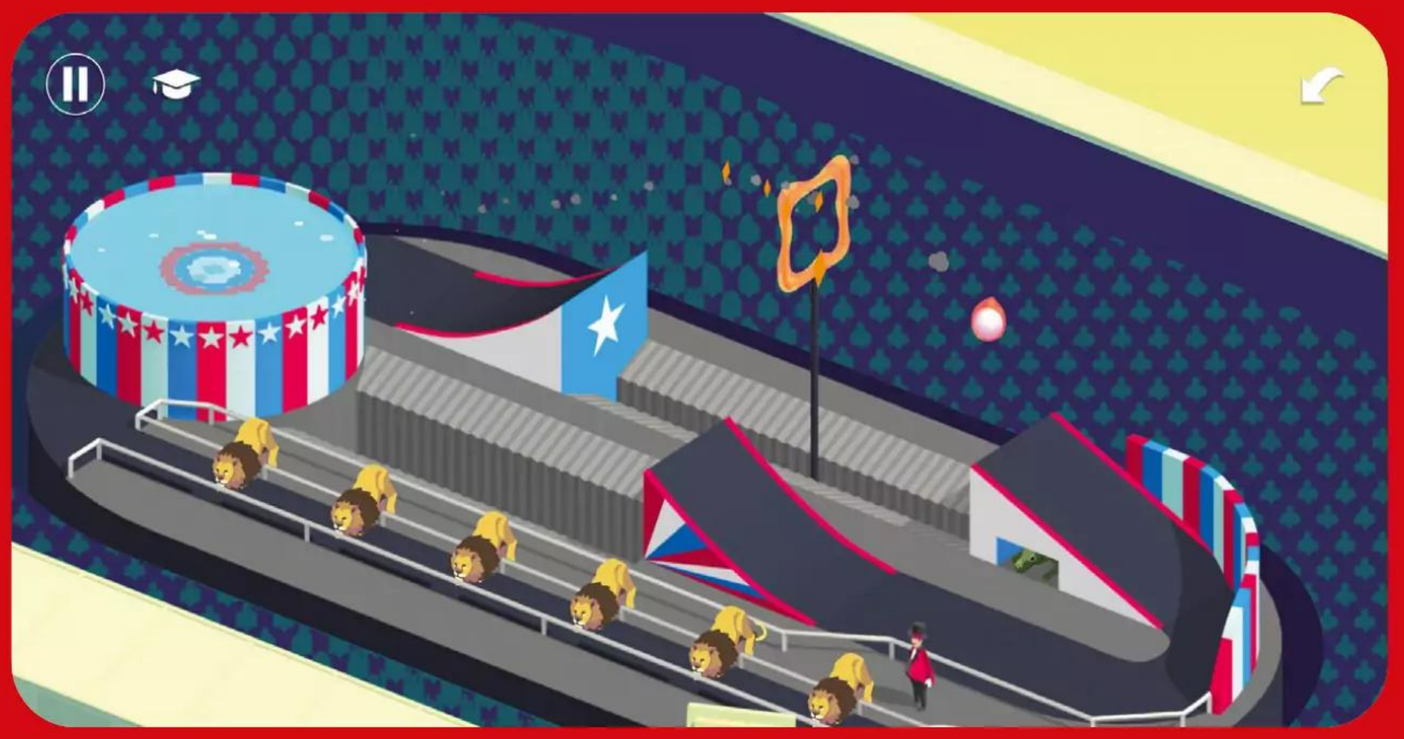
AD HOC

The commitment to "no ads, no in-app purchases, uninterrupted gameplay", as Loombe puts it, stands in notable contrast to the rest of Netflix, which started offering ad-supported subscription options in October 2022. (A contributing factor, surely, to the turnaround in subs numbers.) Netflix Games is still figuring out exactly how it does things, Loombe says, so there's a possibility that this could change in future, but she stresses the "autonomy" afforded to the videogame division – one of the things that made her want to join from her previous role as an executive producer at Riot Games.



RIGHT **Thunder Lotus' *Spiritfarer* brings exactly the kind of indie credibility Netflix appears to be chasing for its library.** FAR RIGHT ***Twelve Minutes*, one of Netflix's signings from the Annapurna Interactive stable**

ABOVE **The beginning of *This Is A True Story*'s production coincided with Frosty Pop's first conversations with Netflix, Sethi says. "We are grateful for their encouragement."** LEFT **This tie-in to Stranger Things' third season is just one of *four* games based on Netflix's hit show**



FAR LEFT ***Reigns: Three Kingdoms***, **the fifth in Nerial's successful Game Of Thrones-meets-Tinder series, is a Netflix exclusive.** LEFT ***Wonderputt: Forever*** **is a golf game with the free-association surrealism of Flash games such as *Grow***

ABOVE **All of *Kentucky Route Zero*** **arrived under the auspices of the Netflix label in December last year.** RIGHT **"Maybe we find some new fans, maybe we don't," Davis says of *Into The Breach*'s Netflix release.** FAR RIGHT ***Lucky Luna*** **is a pixel-art platformer with echoes of *Celeste***

localisation. As anyone who's left the credits rolling on a Netflix show will attest, it has a lot of experience dealing with the latter – something that proved important in the case of *Desta*, which relies on specifics that might have been tricky to translate, from the pronouns in characters' dialogue boxes to the use of local slang to evoke its Manchester setting. "In collaboration with the Netflix translation team, we made the decision to have the characters speak in the regional dialect of the second or third biggest city in a country, and a city that was known for having an industrial background," *Desta* lead designer **Joel Beardshaw** explains. In German, for example, this meant using the 'Ruhr German' dialect used around Dortmund. Meanwhile, the collaboration helped Ustwo find the right way of expressing gender identity, even in "languages, like Italian, which don't have commonly understood gender-neutral pronouns".

So, with all this in mind, are subscription services now the best option for developers who want to make premium, high-quality mobile games? "As an independent game developer, subscription services help mitigate fiscal risk in an often fickle mobile market, premium or otherwise," Sethi says of Frosty Pop, which has also released five games on Apple Arcade. But he remains firm that "it's not the only way". And while Ustwo has just announced that it is bringing the first two *Monument Valley* games to Netflix in 2024, 'with more to come', Beardshaw agrees. "We are continuing to develop subscription service games, as we have done in the past, but we are also always thinking about other ways to get our games into as many people's hands as possible. We want the least amount of friction possible for someone new to games to be able to find our games and get playing, especially those that don't think of themselves as a 'gamer'."

"WE ARE NATURALLY GOING TO MOVE INTO HIGHER-SCOPE TRIPLE-A-TYPE EXPERIENCES"

The latter point taps into another way Netflix is appealing to developers. "One of the reasons that we went with Netflix in the first place was the appeal of potentially tapping into a large playerbase that has not heard of *FTL* or *Into The Breach*," Davis says. The dream, surely, is to be the gaming answer to Squid Game – an unlikely success driven by a prominent presence on Netflix. A look at the download figures, however, suggests this is yet to happen.

In the service's first year, Sensor Tower figures show, Netflix-published games were downloaded 24 million times. As Omdia senior analyst **James McWhirter** points out, "Considering 223 million were subscribing to Netflix at the end of September 2022, under one in ten have delved into the games catalogue to download titles during the launch year – potentially less when accounting for multiple game downloads per subscription."

But those figures are growing: according to Sensor Tower, December 2022 set a new record for monthly downloads of Netflix games, at 5.4 million, and as 2023's first quarter comes to a close, downloads are up 81 per cent compared to the same period last year. Yet this growth is in part a result of the wide breadth of games on offer, and taken individually, even Netflix's most successful titles aren't troubling the top of the app charts. "*Stranger Things: 1984* amassed almost four million downloads during its launch window, with a peak of 1.2m monthly active users, while Sensor Tower data reveals the more recently released *Too Hot To Handle* mobile tie-in game has been downloaded just over two million times, with one million active players in its launch month," McWhirter tells us. "This is, of course, tiny compared with leading mobile titles, but we also know Netflix isn't monetising these players directly – games are a value-add to an existing Netflix subscription."

There's an obvious reason why Netflix's game offerings haven't grabbed subscribers in the same way as its film and TV output: the way they're accessed. While they have some degree of visibility in the main app, we've yet to speak to a Netflix subscriber outside of the industry who wasn't surprised to learn they have access to games. And playing them requires exiting the Netflix ecosystem entirely, being sent to the app store to download the game separately. Once opened, it'll ask you to log into your Netflix account to verify that you're allowed to play. "The flow is not perfect today – we definitely acknowledge that," Loombe says. Netflix is working hard to make the login "work seamlessly" and "remove friction", she explains, but operating within these mobile walled gardens means playing by Apple and Google's rules. "There's only so much we can do."

This, surely, is where Netflix's future ambitions come in. As Loombe says, mobile is only the focus *for now*. Its California studio, led by former *Overwatch* executive producer Chacko Sonny, is working on a PC game, according to job listings posted last year. Loombe won't be drawn on details of what that game is, beyond that it is "triple-A" – a term she accompanies with air quotes, "because who really knows what triple-A means?" But, she adds, "as we build up the muscles to launch more games, and we learn more things, then we are naturally going to move into higher scope, more complex, triple-A-type experiences, across both internal and external [developers]."

Given the relative success of tie-in games for Netflix, we have to wonder if that slate includes adaptations of its

Matthew Davis, lead programmer of *Into The Breach* and co-founder of Subset Games

SHARED CREED

Not all of Netflix's external dev partners are small indies. It has been working with Ubisoft for a few years on adaptations of games including *Splinter Cell*, *Far Cry* and *Assassin's Creed*, but in September 2022 it announced that it would be extending that deal and sending things in the opposite direction, with three Netflix-exclusive mobile games from the publisher. We've seen the first two of those, *Valiant Hearts: Coming Home* and *Mighty Quest: Rogue Palace*, but the clear target here is a forthcoming *Assassin's Creed* title – something Netflix is keeping tightly under wraps, except to suggest that it'll arrive alongside the TV series.

Joel Beardshaw, lead game designer, Ustwo Games

biggest hits. "We have IPs that we think would work well in games, but then it's about really figuring out, OK, what kind of game is that – how would that feel and play?" Loombe says. She stresses "authenticity" as one of the reasons that *Too Hot To Handle* has performed well, and as something Netflix is seeking in any future adaptations. "You know, the Stranger Things games that we've got, for example, they're great games, but I don't think we've done *the* Stranger Things game yet – the one that is authentically connected to that universe and those characters that the fans love."

Beyond that, the next big step for Netflix Games is cloud streaming, technology for which it's currently working to develop. This is undeniably a natural fit for Netflix, which has, after all, built its empire on streaming, and a solution to many of the problems it currently faces on mobile – though it's hard not to draw a comparison with other tech giants that have moved into videogames and tried to make cloud streaming work, with varying degrees of success.

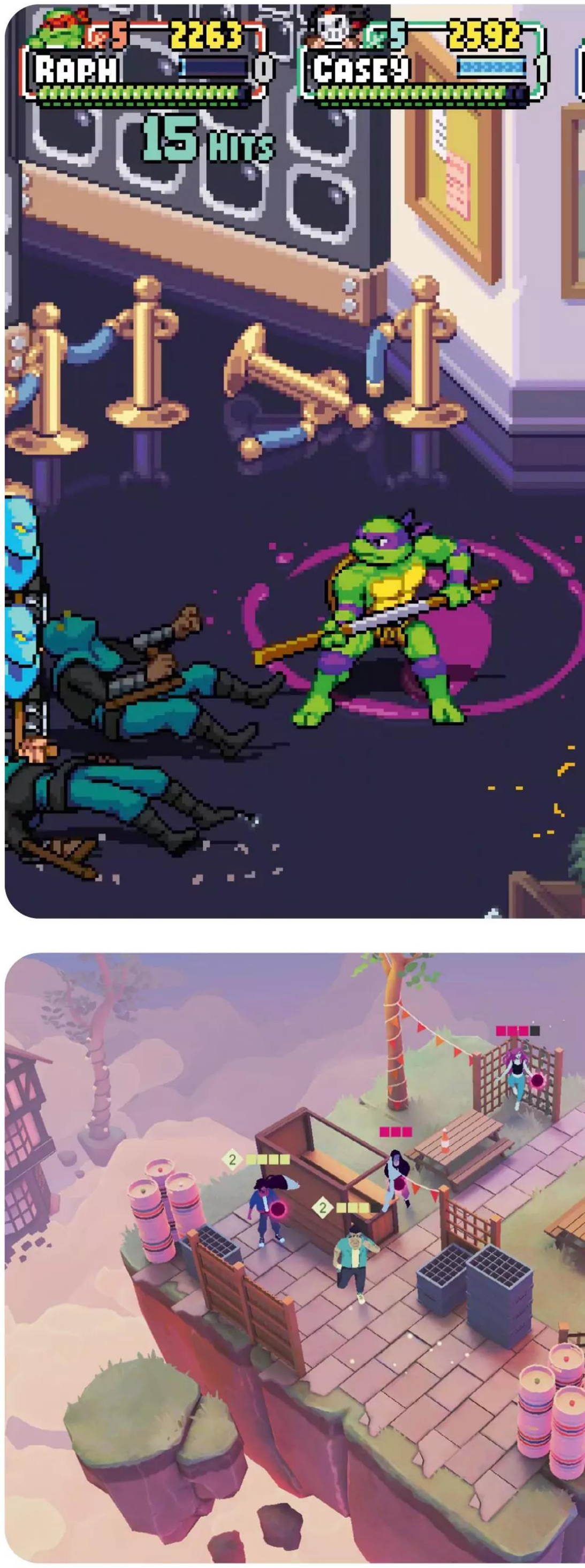
"WE WANT OUR MEMBERS TO BE ABLE TO PLAY GAMES WHEREVER NETFLIX IS. THAT'S THE VISION"

In the meantime, Netflix has many other things to work out as it starts to expand its videogame offering beyond mobile. For instance, Night School Studios' forthcoming *Oxenfree* sequel, as well as being made available through Netflix on mobile, will be sold on PC and consoles. That, presumably, is the result of deals made before the acquisition – but is it how Netflix intends to proceed with games from its in-house studios, or is exclusivity something that will eventually become important once it's making its own PC games? "We want our members to be able to play games wherever Netflix is. And that's the ultimate vision," Loombe reiterates. "As for how that's executed, in reality, we still need to figure all of those details out."

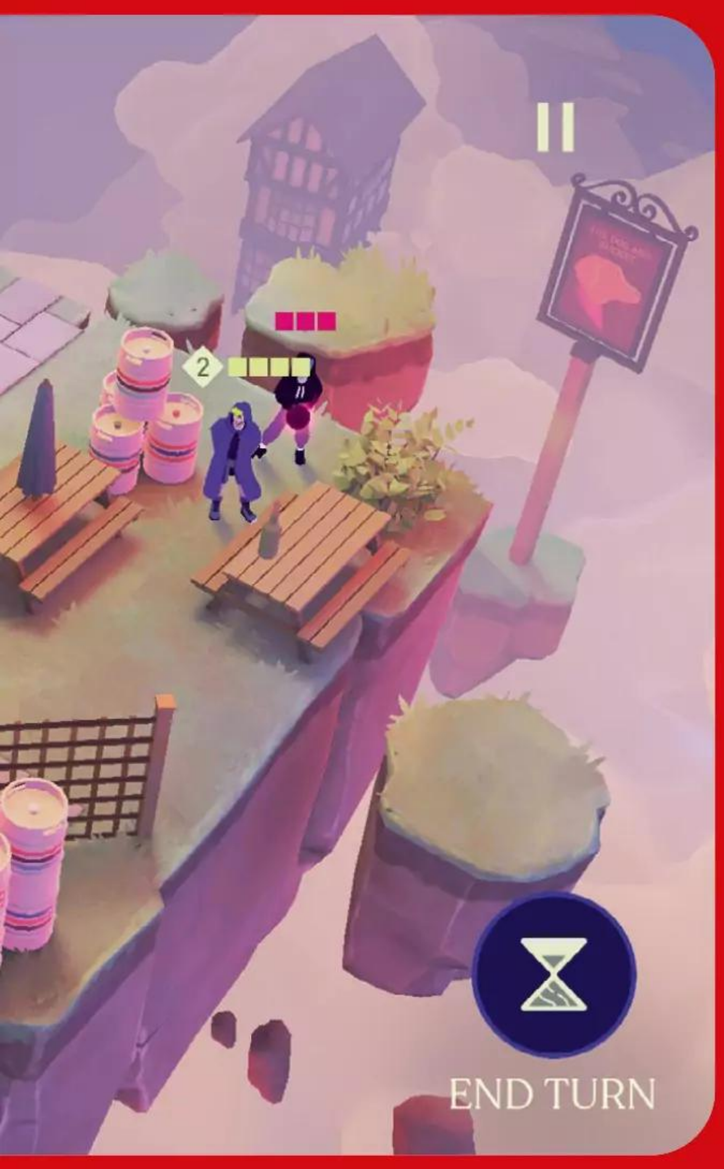
As Loombe reminds us on multiple occasions, it's still early days. And it *is* easy to forget, amid the first flurry of releases, that 18 months ago Netflix Games didn't really exist. "This really is a serious, longterm bet for us," she stresses – and having come into the space fast, in classic tech-company fashion, Netflix now wants to take time to learn. "We are starting very small," Loombe says when we ask about plans for cloud gaming. "We're still learning from the games that we have on mobile – and we'll probably just take a similar journey with our streaming tech that we have with mobile games. You know: start small, learn, iterate on things, figure out what's working and what's not, and then continue to grow over time. And that will start in the near future." ■

SCREEN TO SCREEN

In the past, Netflix has licensed its properties to external developers, but with a lot of game dev talent on its payroll, are those adaptations now going to be kept in-house? "We don't reserve Netflix IP just for the internal teams," Loombe says. "It really is about who can make the best version of that game, based on the talent that they have in the studio." This is verified by the announcement of a partnership with mobile developer Super Evil Megacorp to make a game based on a Netflix property that hasn't even been revealed in its TV or film form yet.



LEFT **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles isn't *strictly* a Netflix property, but the TV connection makes it easy to see why *Shredder's Revenge* is one of the service's more popular releases to date.** BELOW ***Highwater* is an adventure game in which you explore a flooded post-apocalyptic Earth**



FAR LEFT **Beardshaw sees a commonality between *Desta*'s focus on "real characters with grounded problems, but dealing with over-the-top stakes" and popular Netflix shows such as Sex Education, Dark and Stranger Things.** LEFT **The delightful *Poinpy* is one of three Devolver Digital games to have been launched on Netflix, along with *Reigns* and *Terra Nil***

THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

The story of Humanity: how Enhance's unique puzzler is seeking to recapture the spirit of early PlayStation

By Chris Schilling

Most of us have at some point experienced the phenomenon that is the *Tetris* effect – the term coined to describe the way Alexey Pajitnov's seminal puzzler tapped into the subconsciousnesses of players who'd spent a lot of time playing the game. **Tetsuya Mizuguchi** is better acquainted with it than most – he did, after all, produce a game titled after it. And over the Christmas holiday in 2017, he experienced that sensation anew – or something close to it, at least. Prior to finishing work for the festive season, his final appointment was as a judge at a Unity showcase in Tokyo, where Kentaro Yama, a developer at design studio Tha Ltd, was giving a presentation. Mesmerised by what he saw on the screen, Mizuguchi found it occupying his waking and sleeping thoughts throughout his winter break. But it wasn't falling *blocks* he saw in his dreams. It was *people*. ▶

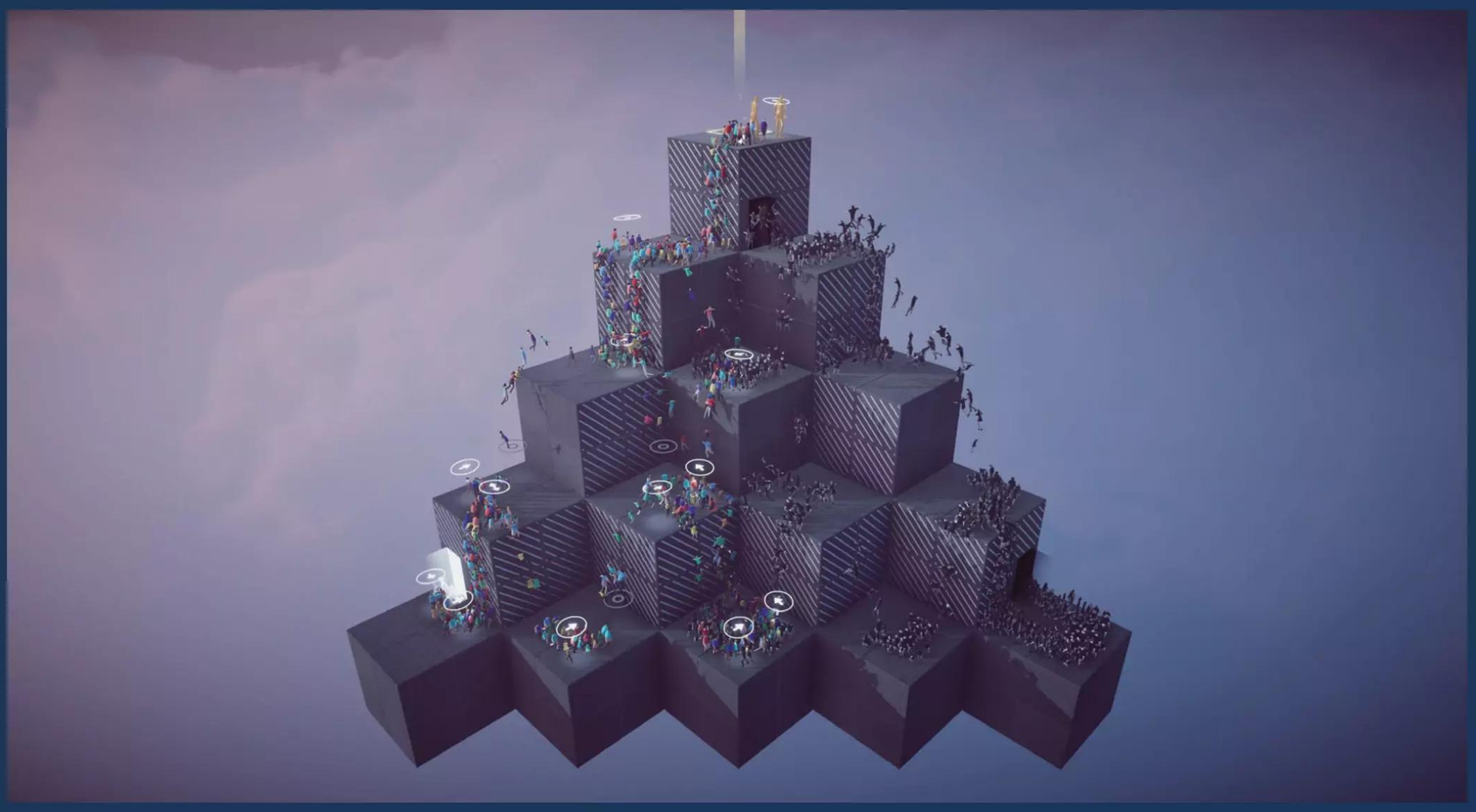
THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

Enhance founder
Tetsuya Mizuguchi

Milling around in their thousands; cascading from platform edges; arcing through the air, arms flailing desperately: there's a hypnotic quality to the mindless masses of *Humanity*, such that you immediately realise what Mizuguchi saw in it. The two had previously met years before, and Mizuguchi was aware of Nakamura's work – "There's something about his design philosophy that speaks to me in a very architectural way," the Enhance founder says. But this had captured his imagination like nothing else before.

There was, however, one small fly in the ointment: it wasn't actually a game at all. The brainchild of Tha's founder, award-winning Web designer **Yugo Nakamura**, this simulation had been created as "a project that basically dealt with crowds and how organically they move, and their behaviour and interactions," Nakamura says via a video call from Enhance's Tokyo office, where he sits alongside the man everyone refers to simply as 'Miz'. "As we were working on that, at some point in time, we were wondering: how would this work as a game? Or how could this become a concept that could *turn into* a game?"

"MOSES, LEADING THE MILLIONS OF HUMANS, TRYING TO DIVIDE THE RED SEA – WHAT *IS* THAT?"



Unsure of where to take the idea, Nakamura uploaded the tech demo to Tha's website "in the hope that someone – anyone – would respond," he says. Having cast his line, the studio didn't get a nibble until that Unity conference, and Yama's demonstration. "Here I am trying to spend the holidays not thinking too much about work, but it was one of those things that just kept coming up," Mizuguchi laughs. He, too, had already begun to wonder how this tech demo could be reshaped into an interactive experience, and sent a Facebook message to Yama, asking if Tha had any interest in pursuing this as a game. Immediately the answer came back: yes, we're interested. Mizuguchi contacted Nakamura directly and things started moving quickly: by March, the two met up and started discussing the possibility of a collaboration.

When the two sat down together, Nakamura outlined a simple game concept. "The one thing that I knew was gonna happen is that there were these crowds, and that you were going to lead the humans to a goal, a finish line," he says. "And then the process of that, all these different commands, actions, gimmicks – all the fun parts of it – would happen in between, with the end goal to lead the humans to what we call 'the light' in the game." As Mizuguchi began to discuss ideas around a core loop and mechanics that would pair well with that central concept, Nakamura brought with him an image board, with various pictures representing the disparate thoughts he'd had and the themes he was hoping to explore.

"One of the initial thoughts I had was: 'OK, how do you lead the humans?' For example, Moses, leading the millions of humans and trying to divide the Red Sea – what *is* that? What's behind that whole idea? And how do you achieve that [in a game]? That was one very out-there, high-level concept that I pulled some ideas and inspirations from." Another, rather more controversial, figure also came to mind. "In the States, there was a figure by the name of Trump," he muses. The sheep-like behaviour of these crowds hardly makes for a flattering comparison, though he explains it was more about considering different approaches to leadership, as well as the concept of division.

The answer which they eventually reached is certainly a good deal more appealing than a flaxen-haired demagogue. Though your perspective is akin to that of a god game, the camera hovering high above the level, you are no invisible deity. Rather, you have direct control of a luminous shiba inu, scampering across stages to manually place commands to direct the pack. Originally, ▶

Nakamura has previous experience with the behaviour of crowds: in 2016, Tha released *Guntai*, a mobile app in which you control a large flock of birds

The dark-clothed figures are referred to as 'the Others'; you need to find various ways to keep the two groups apart, lest your charges be subsumed into their ranks

***Humanity* director Yugo Nakamura**

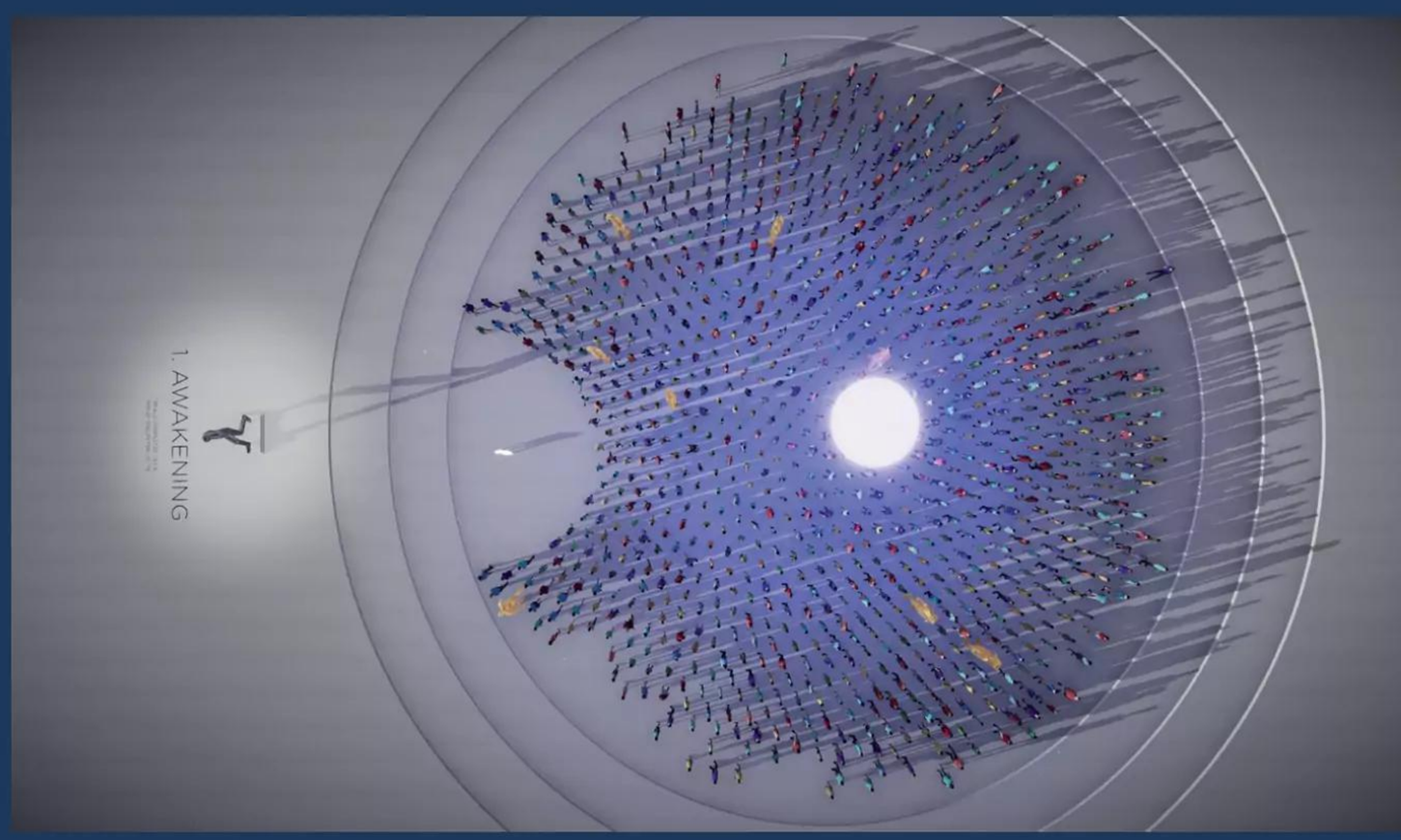
THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

Nakamura says, the leader was chosen from the crowd, a single character who would lead the rest towards the light. But, struggling to find a way to make it work, he decided to explore his second idea, dropping in an ordinary cursor as a placeholder, to see if it would work.

Then came the matter of figuring out how to turn that cursor into someone – or something – that the humans might naturally follow. "Dogs are man's best friend, so it felt very natural to have that relationship exist in this kind of story – it's just that the roles are sort of reversed," Nakamura says. "I'm not saying that dogs in real life don't have a mind or a soul," he adds, quickly. "But it was not unnatural to have that dog and human relationship. For example, if I dropped in a cat, it just seemed like that was not the right fit." We can't help but agree. Surely it would simply wander off and leave the humans to plunge off the stage to their doom.

Although 'doom' isn't quite accurate. You're told early on that letting your charges fall off the edge – or plunge too far from a high platform – isn't fatal. Rather, they will be miraculously returned to the entrance, unharmed. Which is good news, since you soon learn that you can't be precious about preventing them from falling off – not least when they're often emerging from three or four different entrances, positioned at the farthest reaches of a stage. Your shiba inu simply can't be in that many places at once. There are times, too, when you place a command too early or too late and one or two humans end up separated from the rest. You might arrange four turn commands to have a group marching in a loop while you consider your next move, but as hundreds or thousands squeeze into an increasingly tight space, you will invariably see some nudged over the line – which sometimes means over the side.

For a while, though, this is hard to get your head around: your innate instinct is to keep them all alive if you possibly can, and that kicks in even when you've acclimatised to the fact that you can't. The development team has noticed that reaction from streamers to the game's recent demo – producer **Mark MacDonald** notes that the tutorial message making clear that nobody is actually dying wasn't included in the demo's slice of levels, and the response has encouraged the team to include it in one of the game's few unskippable cutscenes even earlier than it originally appeared. Nakamura seems amused by it all. "I was going at it like, 'Who cares how many humans die and fall off these levels? So be it – let them die'. Ultimately, you still have a goal that you have to aim for. But in the process of that, who cares if they jump off or fall off? So I was sort of going in that direction, but oftentimes Miz and Mark and the team at Enhance would say, 'No,



The humans you successfully guide into the light assemble in a pristine, minimalist hub area, to which you return after completing each set of trials

let's rethink this process and fine-tune it. In the end, we were able to find the right balance – we didn't want you to feel like there's going to be this high stress the entire time that you're playing the game."

But, as MacDonald adds, there is a point to that tension: "We don't want it to necessarily *not* affect you – the game is more interesting for that reason. That sense of, 'Oh yeah, at what point did I stop noticing or caring about that?' – those are notions and themes that the game tries to play with. You know, this is not War And Peace, but I do think that one of the things that attracted us to it, from the Enhance side, was this feeling of it being something more than just a puzzle game. And part of that is down to it being humans that you're controlling."

It's not simply that the human element makes you care more, but that the game's dynamic physics also capture our inherent unpredictability as a species.

"I WAS GOING AT IT LIKE, 'WHO CARES HOW MANY HUMANS DIE'?"

Much as the majority might advance in tight formation, as they jostle and collide with one another and various objects, as they take flight when prompted by a jump command or find themselves shunted around by conveyors and blown back by industrial fans, there's a thrilling messiness to their movement. And since it rejects the precision you find in other puzzle games, *Humanity*'s design demanded a different approach to encouraging mastery.

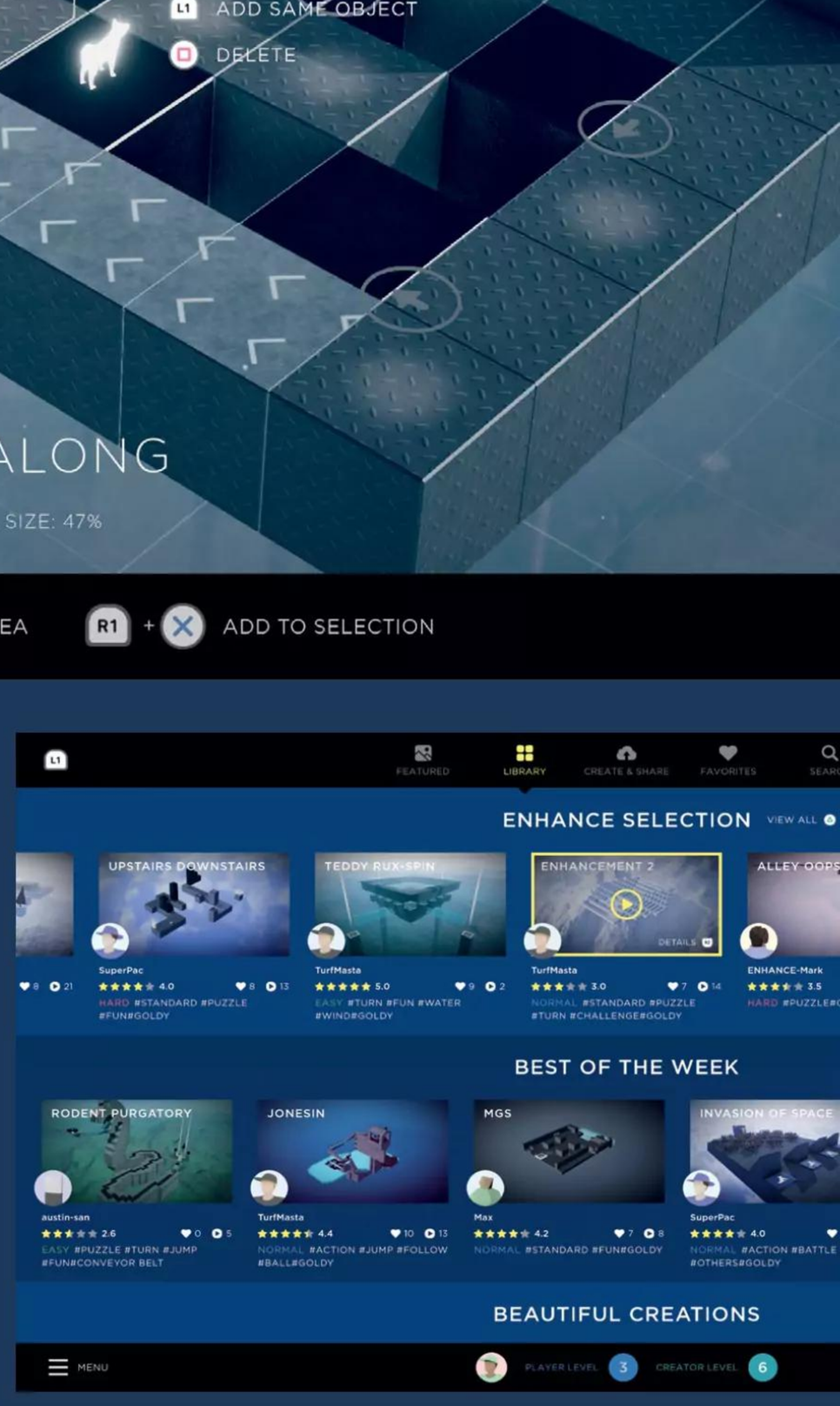
"Your gaming instinct is to grade and score and give people an incentive," MacDonald says. "But what the team was very adamant about, and I agree, was that doing that would make it just not ▶

PEOPLE POWER

"It's more time than any of us expected this to take," MacDonald says of the game's extended development. Three major factors were involved: the advent of PS5, which allowed Enhance to improve the visual fidelity and add haptic feedback (heavily inspired by Team Asobi's work on *Astro's Playroom*); the arrival of PSVR2; and the decision to let players create levels. With no prior experience, the team didn't quite understand what an undertaking the latter element would prove to be. "It's *so* much harder than it looks," MacDonald admits. "Even designing the back end, so that we can remove all the penis levels quickly." When *Humanity* is released, the sharing tools will be marked as still in beta. "We have a very healthy fear for when this stuff is out there and at scale for how many different ways that it can break in unintended ways. But yeah, doing that to a competent level – mad respect for stuff out there like *Dreams* and *Mario Maker*."

fun. Like, you already sometimes have to restart a stage, and we did as much as we could to lighten that impact." (Should you make a small but critical mistake, you can begin again with all the previously laid-down commands still in place, rather than removing them all.) "We didn't want to take away the physics – that was an important thing," MacDonald continues. "But we also didn't want people to feel like, you know, 'Eff you, game! How dare you do that – I wasn't in control of that!'"

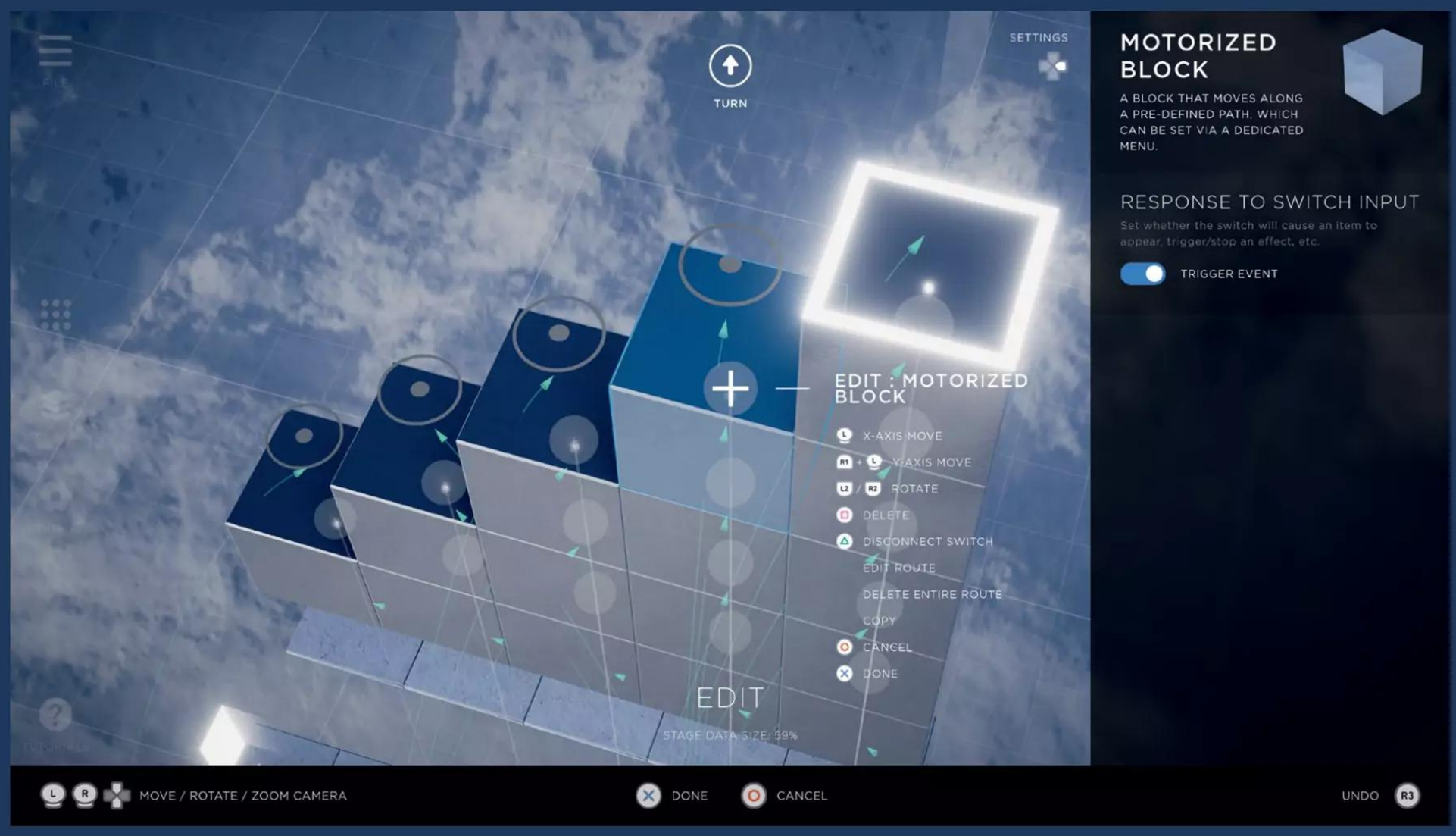
Enhance and Tha's solution is an elegant one. On each stage you will find golden idols, which tend to lie away from the simplest route to the exit. Each 'Goldy' is in stasis, which sometimes means you'll find them floating in the air, requiring you to experiment with the float command or different types of jump until you've found the right trajectory to pass through them. Once touched by a human group, it joins the crowd, following their movements. Setting aside what they might represent – Nakamura notes that the timing of the demo's arrival meant many streamers referred to them as 'Oscars' – their presence reintroduces that fear of loss, because once they fall from a stage they can't be recovered, which means you'll need to start over. They function similarly to stars in a *Mario* game, since you'll need to gather a certain number to unlock the final trial of each set. But they also afford you a string of rewards, from different outfits (including hats) for the humans to new functions, such as the ability to pause and take stock in the middle of a level by holding the left trigger.

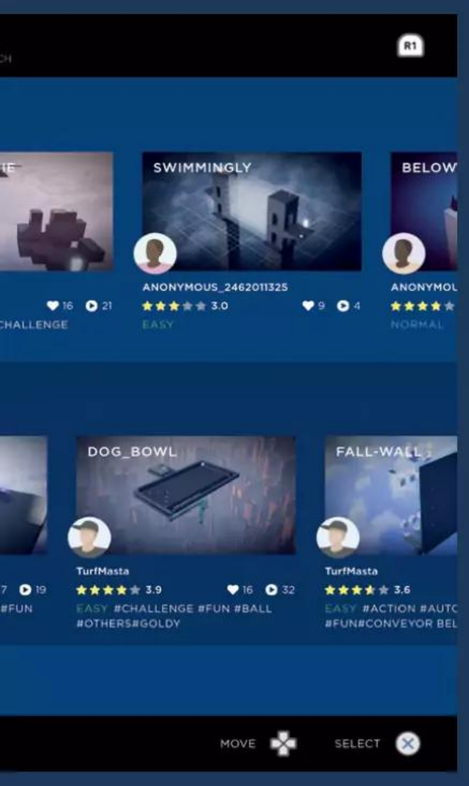


In a sense, it recalls *Tetris Effect*'s 'Zone' feature, in that it's a moment of calm amid the maelstrom: in both cases, when things are getting a little hectic, this affords you the power to provide yourself with respite. But there are important differences, too: in *Tetris Effect*, it was an opportunity to rapidly clear away the stack of blocks. When you unpause here, all those figures are still there, awaiting your guidance. It's a reminder that this is and isn't an Enhance game; Mizuguchi and company have definitely left their mark on *Humanity* (in more ways than one, you might say) but this is, as MacDonald notes, very much Nakamura's baby. "It's his vision, and we at Enhance are going to

THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

Humanity's stage builder is remarkably accomplished for a first attempt – though its sharing tools will still be in beta at launch





Extending development let Enhance add extra functionality to the creative tools, such as separate user levels for creators and players

give all the advice and do everything we can to make that vision the best that it can be."

Both Mizuguchi and MacDonald attribute that to Nakamura's design sensibilities – even as it becomes clear that this is no ordinary publisher-developer setup, but much more of a collaborative project, with Enhance regularly offering more mechanic-driven suggestions than Tha would then implement. "But Yugo-san would take that advice and interpret it and always put it through his filter, and I think has come up with a lot of untypical ways to do stuff that games do," MacDonald says.

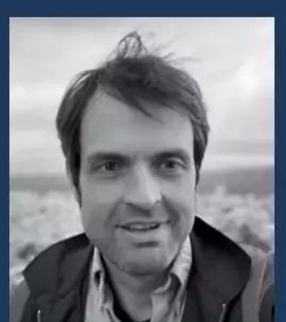
From Nakamura's point of view, the aesthetic was crucial, and any new elements had to be congruous with that. Which in turn factored into the level design: if a stage didn't allow room for unusual or distinctive crowd behaviours, it would be abandoned or reworked. "A rule of thumb I started off with was wanting to make sure that, no matter how long you stared at it, it wouldn't bore you," Nakamura says. "And then in terms of the variation, the different types of interactions we looked at, sure, we did a *lot* of experimenting. And I would say as a guesstimate, of all the things that we tried, maybe like at most 20 per cent are in the final game. There was a lot of stuff that we thought would work, but didn't – it either didn't work in maintaining a fun puzzle game experience, or it didn't qualify and meet the standards of my base idea that it had to still look interesting and not repetitive. Those were the [guiding] principles we worked with."

FROM NAKAMURA'S POINT OF VIEW, THE AESTHETIC WAS CRUCIAL

The result of this close collaboration is a game that is at once very different from Enhance's previous releases yet seems to fit neatly within its catalogue. There are certain qualities it shares with Mizuguchi's past work – certainly in the way it feels invested in the idea of connectedness, and of collective action (an early line refers to the power of the group "as more than individuals"), and the way it deals with lofty philosophical themes in an abstract way. It's there, too, in its satisfying sound design, from the soothing, meditative soundtrack to the delightful arpeggio of pops that accompanies the dog moving through the crowd, leaping from human to human to cross large gaps or clamber up to higher ground.

"It might not be an Enhance connection, but there is some sort of a common core – a thread that speaks the same language and has a sort of emotional impact," Mizuguchi smiles. It fits, he says, with one of the studio's missions as it moves from developer to active collaborator; the hope is to seek out untouched gems that can be refined and augmented. "If there is something we believe can be turned into an experience that no one has seen or felt before, then we will pursue that."

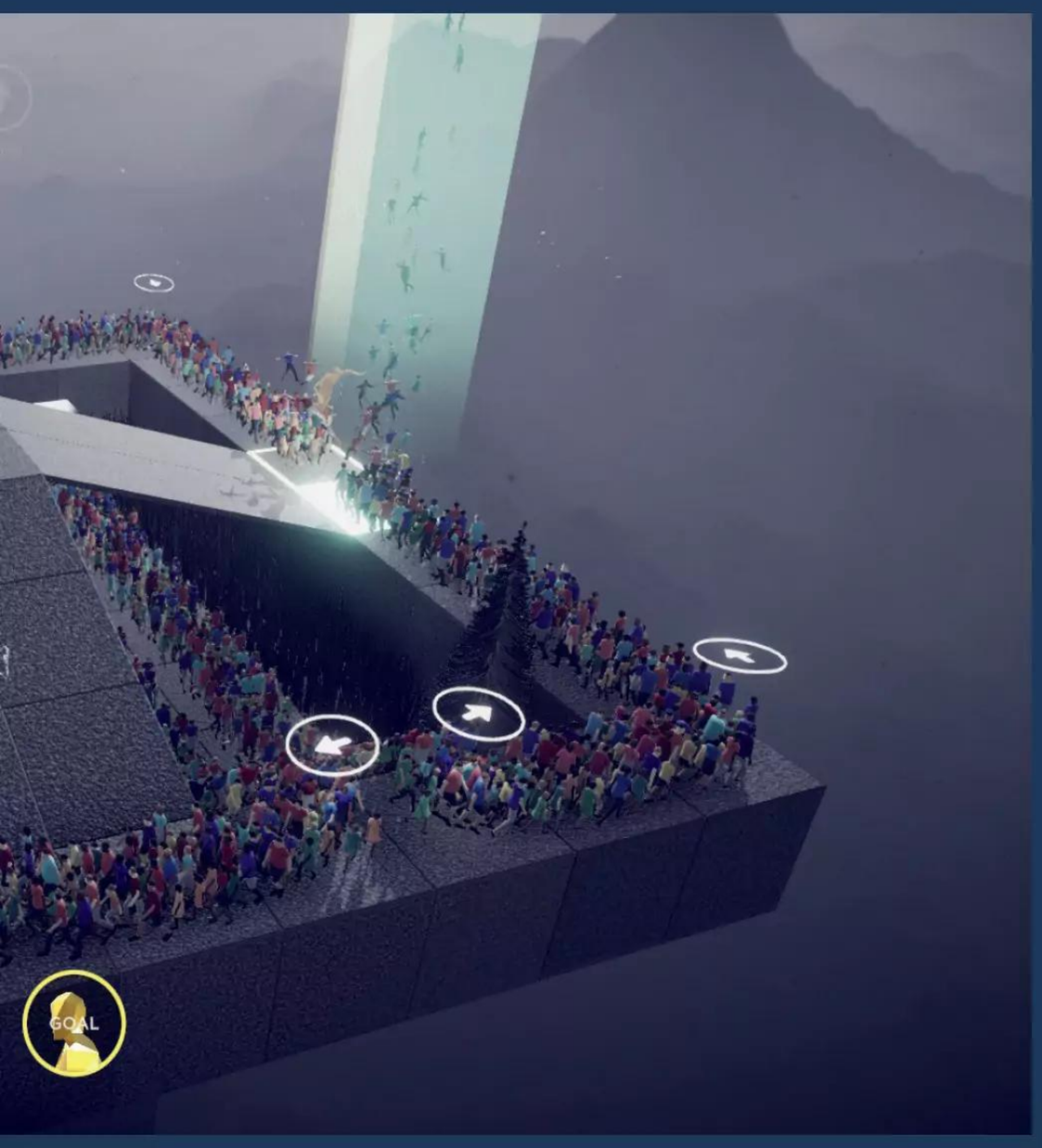
There is, he says, no great overarching philosophy at Enhance – before going on to ▶



Mark MacDonald, Enhance's producer for *Humanity*

deliver an answer that sounds suspiciously close to one. "At the end of the day, game-making is not a company just spitting something out," he says. "It's a human-to-human creative connection. It's a lot of work, and you have to really go for it. But you also have to have that communication and connection, and that love and commitment for what is ultimately going to reach the end user. Seeing how Yugo-san is facing this project, his [determination] to make this into a full game – he's never done this before, and it was a challenge for him. But he's been very serious about it. And knowing what that would look like for him when the game was completed was another layer of love and commitment that we all put in. So in that sense, we look at it like, what is it that Enhance can do – what can we bring to make that happen? People say 'content is king', but to us

Humanity **adjusts the shape of its challenges throughout, becoming more combative later on. The game even features boss battles**



THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

Some trials force you to plot out a route before the humans enter the stage, with no way of altering their path after hitting start

MACDONALD SUMMARISES IT MORE SIMPLY: "WE JUST WANT TO MAKE COOL SHIT"

experience is king." MacDonald summarises it more simply: "We just want to make cool shit."

Indeed, for all that *Humanity*'s crowd simulation is reliant upon the power of modern hardware to have such a profound impact, it's a game that firmly evokes the experimental spirit that defined the early PlayStation era. It's something Enhance is consciously leaning into, not least in the game's marketing (see 'Ad honorem'). But it has helped inform the game's development, too. "That exact thing is part of what drew me especially to this project," MacDonald says. "That time when games were coming out of Japan that would defy genre and defy expectation, that had new angles or a weird, cool aesthetic."

He rattles off a series of titles: *Katamari Damacy*, *PaRappa The Rapper*, *Bust-A-Move*, *Echochrome*, *Chu Chu Rocket*, *IQ: Intelligent Qube*. "Japan is firing on all cylinders right now," he says, "but a lot of that is triple-A stuff: *Persona*, *Ryu Ga Gotoku*, *Elden Ring*. But those experimental games that blossomed out of the move to CD, that weren't possible as much on cartridge format but that you saw on PS1, PS2, even into PS3 – *Tokyo Jungle*! – those games kind of disappeared." Perhaps the most exciting thing about *Humanity*, then, is that it seems to have inspired Enhance to prove otherwise – it certainly won't be the last game Enhance publishes. "We have a bunch of stuff in the works," MacDonald says. "Some of it is very much like, 'Oh yeah, that's the Enhance stuff'. And some of it is very much, 'Whoa, Enhance is doing *that*?' – I think even more so than *Humanity*." The kind of games, in other words, that you can't get out of your head. ■

AD HONOREM

When we mention that *Humanity* has something of the feel of classic PlayStation games, MacDonald raises his fists in triumph. "That's actually the entire thrust of our marketing and PR messaging behind this game," he grins. Enhance has produced a live-action campaign based on the often-strange ads of the PS1 era. "*Rez* was one of them, actually – the whole ad campaign in Japan was genius," he says. "They were like 15 or 30 seconds long each and mostly live action: they would show just a tiny bit of gameplay at the end but they were really edgy and attention-grabbing. And these ones are *out there*, in the way that those things were out there. Hopefully they'll get the message across."

THE MAKING OF...

WEIRD WEST

How a team of former Arkane devs wrangled an increasingly Wild West

By Niall O'Donoghue

Format PC, PS4, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Developer WolfEye Studios
Publisher Devolver Digital
Origin Various
Release 2022

When you think of an immersive sim, it's unlikely that you'd picture an isometric game. Where genre stalwarts such as *Deus Ex* and *Thief* work to ground you in the perspective of your character, *Weird West* is more distant, literally placing you at a remove amid the great American wilderness. Yet poke around the edges of any given level, and *Weird West* soon reveals itself to be a true example of the form.

Yes, you could kick down the door of a bank controlled by the Stillwater gang and blast your way through hordes of enemies to free a prisoner. But what if you climbed up a ruined structure nearby instead, using your vantage point to spy a second-floor window for entry? In time-honoured cowboy fashion, luring out the Stillwater leader for a high-noon shootout is an option – provided, that is, you learn the right insult to provoke him. Talk to the bartender, meanwhile, and you could procure drugged wine: just the thing to slip to the prison guard.

This stuff seemed to come naturally to the team at WolfEye Studios – which was, after all, co-founded by **Raphaël Colantonio**, founder of *Dishonored* and *Prey* developer Arkane Studios, reuniting with many of his ex-colleagues. One of them is WolfEye co-founder and CEO **Julien Roby**, who lays out the key design principle that is *Weird West*'s inheritance from that studio: "One of our big pillars is saying 'yes' to the player. We want to make sure that the game rewards the player for being smart and rewards them for trying something."

That's easier said than done, however. And so what began as a four-person team working on a small-scale 2D prototype would eventually balloon into a 25-person, four-year development cycle, struggling to bring such a highly systemic universe to life. The game that was eventually released in 2022, we soon find out, is very different to the one Colantonio and Roby had originally planned.

Colantonio left Arkane in 2017, 18 years after founding the company in Lyon. While he still speaks fondly of his time at the studio, his exit was motivated by numerous factors: his desire to travel; to escape the corporate world of triple-A development; and an itch to prove himself beyond Arkane's output. "Either I was going to stay there forever and never have a chance to try something else, or I had to go," he explains. "There was a weird feeling of 'I've got to burn the house [down] and start again'."

Colantonio compares worldbuilding with painting. "It's messy," he says. "There's going to be a lot of iteration"

During a stint in consultancy, Colantonio was approached by Roby. Since his own departure from Arkane in 2013, Roby had worked as a producer on *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* and *Mafia III*, and was similarly interested in returning to smaller-scale game development. These conversations grew into a concrete game idea: an immersive sim presented as a 2D Roguelike from a top-down perspective, complete with twin-stick shooting controls and procedural storytelling. Players would control a different character on every run through a fantastical version of the Wild West, encountering new stories each time.

> "WE WERE OUR OWN ENEMY IN SOME WAYS BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO DO ANYTHING SMALL"

With this concept locked down, WolfEye Studios was set up as a fully remote studio in 2018, initially consisting of Colantonio and Roby alongside Arkane veterans **Étienne Aubert** and Jouan Amate. Aubert had joined Arkane in 2003, working out of a single office in Lyon, and for him, WolfEye represented a homecoming. "Working with a small team again, I got the feeling that [I was] going back in time to when I met Raphaël for the first time, when Arkane was only 12 people," he says.

"It was going back to those roots, and it was so fucking refreshing."

The games these developers made previously were rooted in fully realised worlds, and *Weird West* is no exception. Just as Dunwall infused Victorian-era London with black magic and steampunk technology, *Weird West* takes the dusty landscapes enshrined in countless westerns and unleashes supernatural horrors upon them, including pigmen, zombies and werewolves. But importantly, WolfEye wanted to dig deeper than the tropes it was mashing up – especially some of the less enlightened ones that often come with the western genre.

The studio worked with Elizabeth LaPensée, a videogame writer and comic creator with Anishinaabe and Métis heritage, and with consultants to ensure it portrayed indigenous peoples authentically and respectfully. "Very often, people talk about American culture as just one culture, which is just ridiculous: there were a lot of different nations in America before western people [arrived]," Roby says. "We didn't want to just lift from different cultures just for the purpose of creating our game. It was always this fine line to walk between creating a world that's fictional and draws inspiration off something else."

While WolfEye continues the pedigree of Colantonio's former studio, during development this proved to be something of a double-edged sword. The original intention to create a small, low-budget game soon began to clash with the team's expectations, their enthusiasm gradually leading to feature creep. "We were our own enemy in some ways because we don't know how to do anything really small," Colantonio admits. "*Weird West* went from something we thought we could practically self-publish and self-fund to something that eventually cost more than we had planned, and looked closer to a big game than what we had planned."

As a result, *Weird West* is highly systemic: tossing a lantern into a field can quickly start a wildfire, for example, while puddles created by knocking over a water barrel can be electrified with charged bullets. "That's the thing with immersive sims: every fucking bug turns into a feature," Roby says ruefully, describing one of his favourite examples. *Weird West* features a vendetta system, where NPCs hunt you down in retaliation for past crimes, as well as plagues, which raise the dead from graveyards. When ▶

these systems collided, they produced an unexpected reaction: NPCs would pledge vendettas against you if you killed one of their undead relatives in front of them. Rather than 'fix' this interaction, WolfEye instead flipped it on its head: NPCs don't care about zombies, but the undead *can* seek revenge for the murder of their living family members. Bug becomes feature. "The game becomes magical at that moment usually, when it starts to become alive and does more than what you had imagined," Colantonio says. "More than by design, by philosophy, [our games] are meant to be very surprising and have tons of possibilities, so we're going to encourage that."

On top of this, WolfEye gives players near-total freedom when approaching story missions: kill a critical NPC, and you'll probably find a note or another character nearby to point you towards your next destination. Unsurprisingly, the work required to pull this off is significant. Writers worked with designers to outline storylines, while developers would often implement new pathways and narrative beats ad hoc while testing and playing through levels. "It was a lot of planning initially, and being very obsessed about all the possibilities, but even then you can't think about everything," Roby says. "It's also a lot of headaches in terms of crafting the alternative pathway that makes sense."

Alongside fellow visual design director Emmanuel Petit, Aubert worked with a small team of artists to produce assets quickly and efficiently, leaning into a stylised aesthetic inspired by comic books. It was quite the contrast to his previous work on hyper-detailed 3D games – and an experience that Aubert relished. While creating a single monster in a game such as *Prey* could take several months, *Weird West*'s pigman took five days from receiving references from character artist Cédric Peyravernay. Additionally, working on a smaller team allowed Aubert to wear multiple hats, including animation and prop creation, and gave him the flexibility to make changes quickly. "I don't want to work for big companies any more," he laughs. "I want to work for small teams where we can do more of what we want, where we can really have an impact and do our own thing."

WolfEye initially focused on procedural content, with the player exploring randomised worlds without an overarching narrative linking everything. However, it became clear during development that this approach wasn't working, with generated quests failing to provide strong emotional hooks. What replaced it was an anthologised campaign starring five distinct playable characters. This change necessitated bespoke level design for the core missions, with procedural content repurposed for sidequests – but Colantonio holds that the extra effort was worth the trade-off. "You can't really create interesting characters without any authoring, just relying on some procedural assembling of things with tags – it's going to feel repetitive and lame at some point," he says. "The more authored you go, the more one-off you go, the more interesting it's going to be, and the more it's going to be relatable as a player."

Alongside this radical change to the narrative structure, *Weird West* was shifting dimensions. While the game was initially envisioned from a 2D top-down perspective, WolfEye introduced an isometric camera that players could rotate as levels increasingly featured verticality. Given that the combat system had been built around the top-down camera, it led to what Colantonio describes as a "fundamental problem" in development. "We tried to solve a problem that no other game had solved until then, which is doing a twin-stick shooter with verticality," Roby says. "That was very challenging."

***Weird West* was** initially due for launch in 2021, but was delayed twice before eventually emerging in March 2022. Even then, Roby acknowledges that the game was "a bit rough around the edges" upon release, largely due to the herculean task of testing such a systemic game, and WolfEye has continued to update the game post-launch, including an overhaul of its combat system. "This is the kind of game that would have extremely benefitted from Early Access," Roby reflects. "That will be a lesson learned for our next game."

Another lesson learned: Colantonio says that WolfEye will return to directly authoring the vast majority of content, estimating that only ten per cent of its next game will contain procedural elements such as the vendetta system. Warts and all, though, the team takes pride in what it has accomplished with *Weird West*. "When I look at it today, I can see clearly that it's more than just the sum of its parts," Roby says. "Yes, maybe the camera system is not the best, and maybe the aiming is not the best for everybody. But nonetheless, it's doing a lot of other things that no other game is doing."

When Colantonio looks back on this game, does he feel he's fulfilled the goal that led him down this path in the first place, proving himself beyond the bounds of a single studio? "There have been moments where I have been thinking, 'What happened to me? I left Arkane – that was such a great position'. It's like remembering the past with romanticised eyes. [But then I think] 'Nah, I'd be miserable'. I wanted to have my own freedom," he says. "Yes, we have less money, we have less horsepower behind us than we had at Arkane, but it's worth it for the adventure." ■

Q&A

Raphaël Colantonio

Creative director, *Weird West*

Why are you so taken with immersive sims?

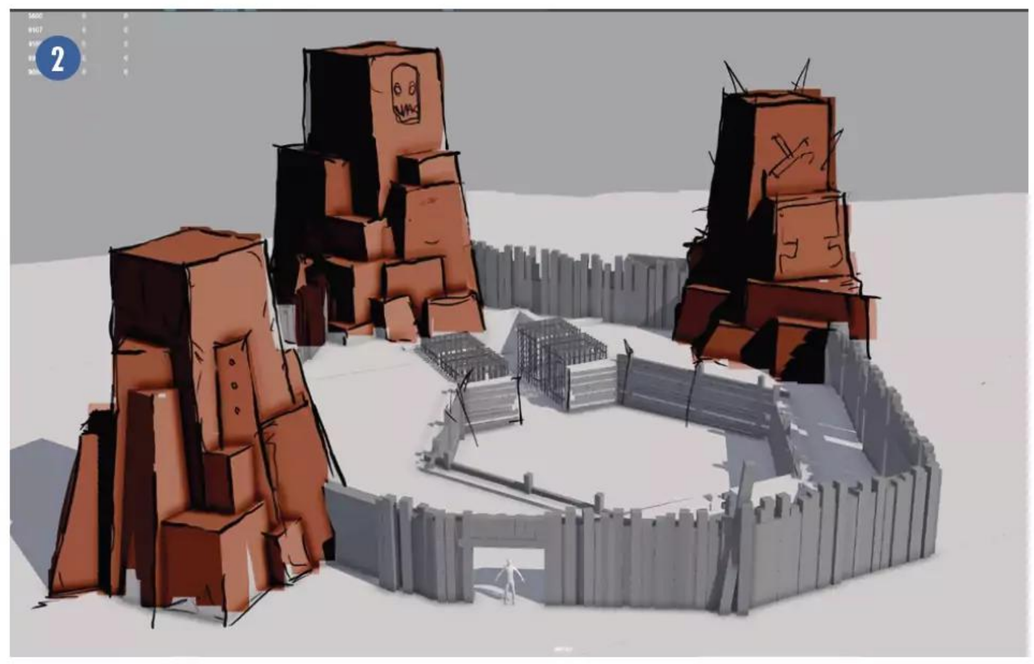
'Immersive sim' is kind of a weird terminology: nobody can even get into full agreement about what it is. We started as kids playing RPGs, and for both [designer Harvey Smith] and I, it was to escape the real world because of our unhappy childhood. That was our way to project ourselves into a different world, a different reality, that is extremely simulated. As a dungeon master, you can do anything you want, you can try things and it goes crazy – it's totally improvised. Eventually, [computer games] tried to emulate that.

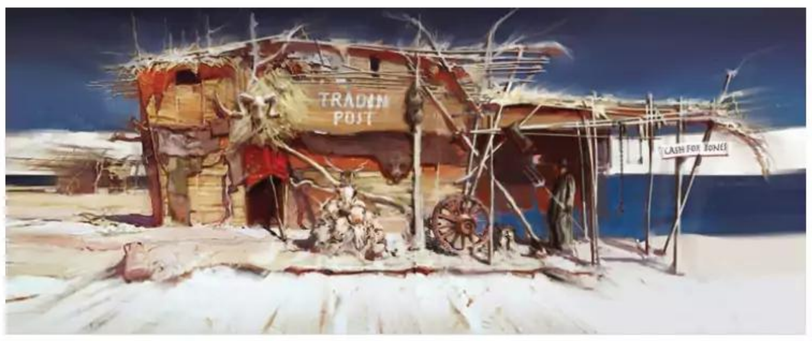
What, then, would you say are the key tenets of these games?

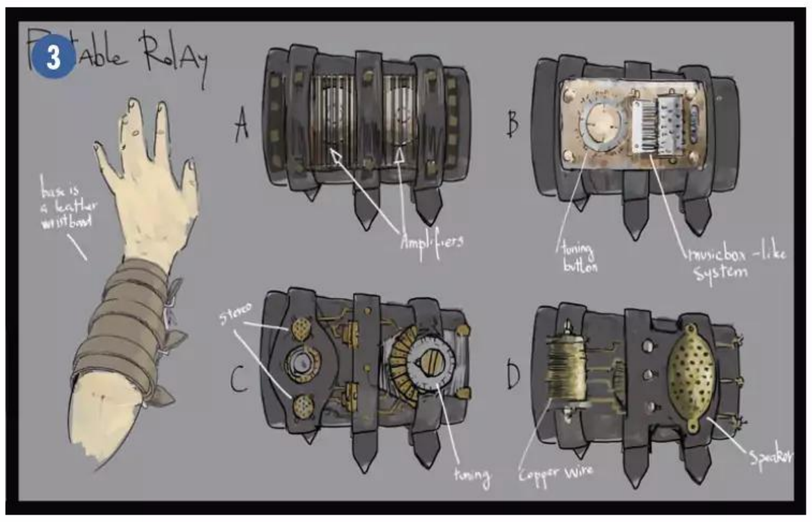
I associated living a simulated adventure [with] being able to pick up every item, to have characters on schedules, having their own thoughts, and me in the middle. I'm going to play in that world that has been made before me, and that exists without me. This is just something that has been incredibly powerful to me as a kid and still is today.

Why does WolfEye operate remotely?

It's a good way to save structure costs and to work with the best wherever they are in the world. We can compensate for the lack of physical meetings by having meetups where everybody meets for a week in a hotel and we work together. That worked for a while, until COVID hit. The best thing about COVID is that everybody experienced it, so there's no need for me to explain what happened: we all felt that moment of despair and solitude which was unbearable, and became really hard for everybody. Working in this way is not something that we really want now, but the world has changed so much that you don't really have a choice – nobody wants to come back to the office.







1 As one half of Weird Wolves alongside Ava Gore, Colantonio also contributed to the soundtrack. The duo's music – including *Prey: Mooncrash*'s credit song, Realization, their first recording together – is available via Spotify.

2 During the prototyping phase, WolfEye's design team considered allowing players to vote on changes to the game world itself.

3 Colantonio's initial vision for *Weird West* was '*Fallout* with no campaign – only sidequests'.

4 *Weird West* begins with a Western-appropriate revenge story, but soon plunges into the deep end of weird, ensuring that it lives up to both halves of its name.

5 As with his previous work on games such as *Dishonored*, Cédric Peyravernay's character designs ensure that every person feels like a recognisable individual

STUDIO PROFILE

KEOKEN INTERACTIVE

From the kitchen table to the stars: how a pair of sibling dreamers achieved lift-off

By Chris Schilling

"In the beginning, everybody was wearing multiple hats," Paul Deetman says. The studio is better at delegating now

Founded 2013
Employees 25
Key staff Koen Deetman (CEO, game director), Paul Deetman (founder/director), Sander van Zanten (audio director), Raynor Arkenbout (narrative director)
URL keokeninteractive.com
Selected softography *Deliver Us The Moon, Deliver Us Mars*
Current projects TBA

Talking to **Paul Deetman**, one half of the sibling duo that founded Keoken Interactive, you get a sense that space was the studio's destiny from the start. It was partly in the Deetman DNA, after all – their grandfather, a keen astronomer, had built telescopes. And as children, Paul and brother Koen would regularly head into the back yard of their family's home in Hoofddorp with a video camera to make amateur remakes of popular movies, Star Wars being a firm favourite.

Later, as students, they moved into different disciplines: Koen studied games and IT, while Paul developed a keen interest in music production. The two soon had stars in their eyes in a different sense. Deciding to pool their creative talents and try their hand at game development, the pair looked at their compatriots at Amsterdam's Guerrilla Games and wondered why there was only one studio in the Netherlands operating at that kind of scale. "We thought, let's try and follow in those footsteps," Paul says, the rest of his answer punctuated by hearty laughter. "And that's pretty hard! So now we understand why there was only one."

Even with little experience, the two decided to aim high, leaning into the fantasy of becoming executives by effectively acting out the role. They cleared the kitchen table, stole a whiteboard from their sister's room, and set to work. "We just went for it," Paul says. "We said, 'OK, let's come up with a concept, drink some coffee, and write something important on the whiteboard'." But if their lack of experience meant at that stage they were essentially cosplaying, much as they had in their yard as kids, they did take their ambitions seriously, going on to rent their first office and hire interns, then staff. Alongside Keoken Interactive, the brothers established a sister company specialising in music for games, TV, film and advertising: that and some work-for-hire projects kept the studio afloat while they worked on their first videogame.

Sander van Zanten, Keoken's audio director, recalls that his first glimpse of the project came when the studio was hosting an alpha playtest of a prototype that never saw the light of day, for a VR horror game. (Scream, Paul adds, was another of the movies they'd attempted to remake in their back yard.) "It was thrilling," he says. "But after that we talked for *hours* about some other concepts that they were working on." The studio was still young, with everyone learning as they went along, albeit with help from industry friends – some at triple-A studios, some at independent outfits, even the odd one-man team – who had offered their advice. "We had multiple perspectives," Paul says. "But most of the time it was just a team collaboration between people and saying, 'How can we go from A to Z?' Let's figure it out in a very hands-on way and then slowly become more professional over time."

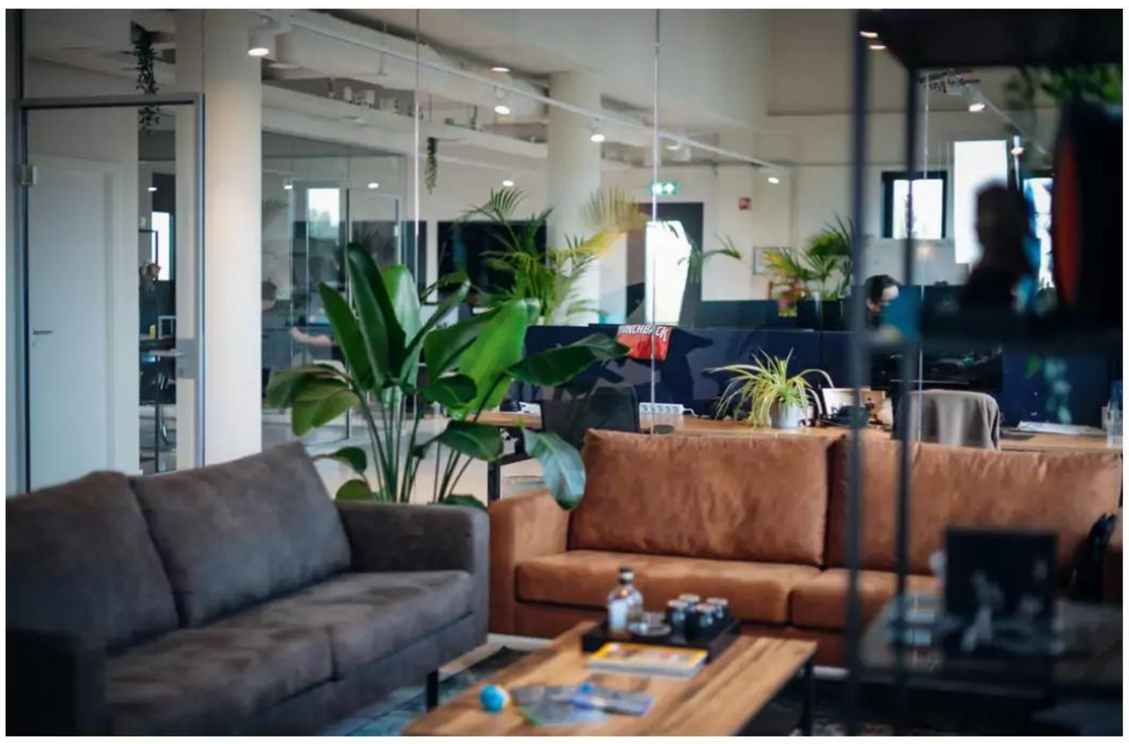
Perhaps that's why the team took a while to figure out which of the many ideas floating around the studio they should commit to. The horror project *had* come in useful, as "more of a research and development [process]", Paul says: through it, the studio had learned plenty about prototyping, playtesting and even producing trailers. "But then we said, 'We need to have focus. We can't [have] all this noise around us – we need to really dive deep into something that we love'." And so, once again, it was time to shoot for the Moon. "After a while," Van Zanten says, "we settled on a sci-fi story, coined by Paul. For the longest time, the project was just called *Moon Man*." Eventually, Keoken opted for the more evocative *Deliver Us The Moon*.

"YOU HAVE TO GIVE US A LITTLE BIT OF ROOM, AS A SMALL INDIE STUDIO IN THE NETHERLANDS, TO CATCH OUR BREATH"

By early 2016, the game – planned for an episodic release – was in a sufficiently advanced state that Keoken decided to launch a Kickstarter, in the hope of crowdfunding the final phases of development. Those ambitions were realised (the game scraped past its $110,000 target at the death) but by November that year, the picture seemed to have changed completely. Starbreeze invested $500,000 to bring the game out on PC and console, in a deal that would allow Keoken to retain the rights to the property, while ceding half its revenue to the publisher. The relationship, alas, broke down, though Paul is sanguine about the split: "They had other fish to fry, and we needed to go in our own direction." That meant releasing the game independently, but also that "we were barely surviving at some points," he says.

Still, the studio was determined to bring the game to market, and it duly did, albeit in incomplete form, as *Deliver Us The Moon: Fortuna* in September 2018. "We were kind of forced to release it with an open ending," Paul says. "But hey, sometimes life is not as fair as you hope it to be." There was, he adds, some backlash from players who praised the concept and atmosphere but were disappointed by the ending. "They said, 'We feel a little bit cheated. We're so invested in the story and then you let us wait for it with a real cliffhanger'. Of course, we said we were finishing the last part to it, but you have to give us a little bit of room, as a small indie studio in the Netherlands, to catch our breath." And, as they did, Keoken caught a break too, with Wired Productions coming aboard to help finally deliver the Moon to Xbox and PlayStation players, as well as publishing an expanded PC release.

Those development hiccups, however, proved a valuable learning experience for Keoken, with everyone required to learn new disciplines as they went. Founders became marketeers. Level designers became trailer editors. "We were doing PR and we were doing press events – we were our own booth babes!" Paul laughs. "Gamescom, PAX – we did it ourselves. Everybody that was good [on] camera, we put them in front of it." The more challenging times for the studio also helped bring everyone closer together. "It's a shared burden," Van Zanten says. "We had all invested so much time, energy, effort, and just poured so much of ourselves into this game. At some point, of course, you've got to cut your losses – but that's when ▶



At the peak of development of *Deliver Us Mars*, there were 35 people working on the game. "So, still a small team," Paul says. "We throw it out there as like these huge titles, but we try to show, especially in terms of the pricing, that we're not competing for the same thing"

you don't see the light at the end of the tunnel any more. I, and many others here, *did* see a light, and we knew what we were working towards. And that is where you learn a lot about yourself, about the people you work with, what people's strengths are, and how you can best utilise them and where you need to help each other out."

All of which stood them in good stead for the next project. Far from putting anyone off, the fact that Keoken had shipped a game in spite of those hurdles – earning positive reviews in the process – made for an appealing story when it came time to approach other publishers. The Deetmans thought Frontier might be a natural fit, although the pitch they turned up with was for an entirely different game. "They loved it – of course!" Paul says, with an impish smile. "But their publishing director said, 'So what about your sequel?' He called it 'a slam-dunkable game', in a very positive sense. It made my brother and I laugh and so we said, 'Sure, let's talk about what we want'."

The studio's ambitions were still stratospheric, and so the Deetmans hired narrative director **Raynor Arkenbout**, whose background in movies would help expand the studio's cinematic aspirations for the followup. The team decided to approach development by working out the story first and foremost, "to let that decide on the trajectory and the journey," Arkenbout says. "We had a *lot* of talks – like I'd step into the office here, and we'd just spend the entire day talking about thematics. But what you get at the end of that, I think, really helped distil what characters we needed, what the story was going to be."

One line became one page, and that kept growing. "We called it the level overview, but it was basically the story overview chopped down in levels and pacing," Arkenbout says. A 70-page story was fully outlined, even before pre-production. And the studio's newfound experience in promotional work came in useful when it came to recruiting new staff: the basis for what would become *Deliver Us Mars* was turned into a three-hour podcast and handed to new staffers as an efficient way to get them up to speed with the story.

It proved advantageous, too, for the motion-capture sessions that would bring the game closer to the studio's triple-A inspirations. Arkenbout hadn't had any experience with mo-cap for videogames, but decided to prepare it in much the same way as he would for a live-action shoot. The response was one of disbelief. "They said, 'Wow, you guys are crazy prepped'. Not naming any names, but they said, 'If a triple-A company comes in here, they'll sit down and *then* they'll start deciding'. They would just do *days* filled with like, 'OK, we've got money to spend – we'll find it as we go'."

"IT WAS LIKE: THIS IS WHAT THEY DO IN AVATAR, RIGHT?" HE SAYS, EYES WIDENING. "NOW *WE'RE* DOING IT"

Keen to ensure he doesn't come across as too critical of the developers Keoken is clearly seeking to emulate – at least within its relatively limited means – Arkenbout adds, "And that's *awesome*, but…" before Paul finishes his sentence. "We don't have that luxury. We needed to make the most of it, and we did everything that we wanted to do." Indeed, it was here, he says, that the Deetmans really felt their childhood dreams coming true. "It was like: this is what they do in Avatar, right?" he says, eyes widening. "Now *we're* doing it."

The studio's second voyage into space, then, was much less bumpy than the first; rather, the turbulence is found within the game's characters, who, as Arkenbout puts it, "are all battling a personal want versus a greater need". He says there's a similar logic behind it to the way Keoken has developed as a studio, calling back to those more challenging times. "When do you grow and learn about yourself as a person? Through failures." He adds that focusing on emotional conflict over direct combat has helped the studio differentiate itself from better-resourced peers. "*Moon* started with a limitation of not building 20,000 NPCs that shoot you with a gun, but *using* that limitation to also think about how can you tell [a story] that's a bit different, I think. And there wasn't even the question that *Mars* was ever going to have violent incursions in your face." Which isn't to say Keoken wants to avoid that type of threat entirely. "One of the big key inspirations we use is Children Of Men: a story where there is a lot of violence and danger in this world. But our characters are trying to not get involved in that, as they try to save themselves through flight rather than fight."

That focus on flight is fitting for a team on a clear upward trajectory, as it continues to look to the stars. "We are not planning to stop any time soon," Paul says. "Space will always be fascinating to us, and to me – to just knock on the sky and wonder what our place in the universe is." But with no immediate plans, or at least nothing he's prepared to reveal, for now, he's happy to reflect on how far Keoken has ventured from the kitchen table. "We've just created a ten-hour experience with a relatively small team in two-and-a-half years, and I'm extremely proud and happy of what we have achieved as a studio." In other words: mission accomplished. ■

1

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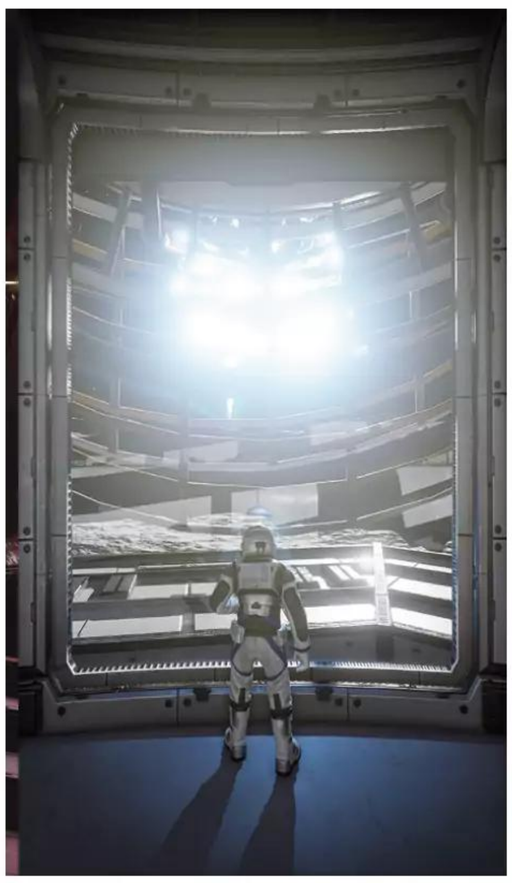

1 In *Deliver Us Mars*, "there's no option for you to engage in violent activities," van Zanten says. With no obvious villain, the studio leaned into the idea of the environments being the 'enemy' for protagonist Kathy.
2 *Deliver Us The Moon* was partly inspired by films such as Interstellar, 2001 and Moon

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Marvel Snap Android
After months of matches against strangers whose only means for boiling our blood is a pass-agg Ms Marvel thumbs-up emoji at the wrong moment, it's strange to find ourselves sitting across a pub table from our opponent. This is courtesy of the new 'Friendly Battle' mode, a misnomer if ever we've heard one. Its genius lies in switching up the stakes of the betting mechanic from which *Snap* takes its name: instead of your ranking, the ante here is a growing chunk of each player's health bar, giving matches the feel of a tense face-off in *Street Fighter*. As in that game, you're playing multiple rounds against the same opponent – a chance to learn their deck and devise counters that kick out its legs from under it. After one particularly brutal defeat, we almost miss the distance of that old anonymity.

Gran Turismo 7 PSVR2
'Immersive' is one of those words that gets thrown around far too often, especially when it comes to VR. But how else to describe the experience of slipping into Polyphony's opus in VR, with Pulse headphones and a Logitech force-feedback wheel? It's so enveloping that a friend (the one lending us said wheel) takes off the headset to discover a bloody accident, of which they'd been blissfully unaware while racing Japan's iconic High-Speed Ring.

The Murder Of Sonic The Hedgehog PC
Corporate April Fools gags and *Sonic The Hedgehog* – these are very much *not* a few of our favourite things. But the promise of Sega murdering its own mascot is irresistible (although some might argue it achieved this already with *Frontiers*), and this handsomely presented visual novel has been given a surprising amount of care, even if the actual detective work is ultimately a little shallow.

Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

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Misery business

Is everyone OK? We have to ask because, well, this issue's Play selection suggests that today's game designers are not exactly the happiest of bunnies right now. *The Last Worker*, for example, paints a vividly bleak picture of humanity's future, casting you as the sole living employee of Jüngle, an online retail giant whose resemblance to any existing company is, ahem, surely coincidental. (At least you're accompanied by a friendly robot assistant, voiced by Jason Isaacs, who is the subject of our Post Script on p106.)

'Reverse city builder' *Terra Nil*, meanwhile, might have an even gloomier worldview. Sure, you're making nature flourish anew in previously inhospitable environments, but it posits that the planet would be far better off if, having helped provide the conditions to make the ecosystem self-sustainable, we got on a rocket and left it behind. Maybe developer Free Lives has a point: it's a pretty grim old time for anyone left on Earth, between LA being taken over by zombies (*Dead Island 2*) and a paranormal phenomenon in Tokyo causing citizens to develop murderous impulses (*Paranormasight: The Seven Mysteries Of Honjo*). Perhaps we should take our chances on the open sea – but then again, judging by the horrors we haul aboard in *Dredge*, maybe not.

The name *Have A Nice Death* hints that we might have a more pleasant time once we've shuffled off this mortal coil. Alas, it turns out the bounds of bureaucracy are inescapable here, too: even the business of death comes with mountains of paperwork. All of which leaves *The Wreck* – which begins with the double-whammy of a harrowing car accident and the hospitalisation of the protagonist's mother – as arguably the most optimistic game of the month. Even in dark times, it suggests, we can still experience joy: a reminder that good cheer can be found in the unlikeliest of places.

Dead Island 2

Publisher Deep Silver
Developer Dambuster Studios
Format PC, PS4, PS5 (tested), Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

For the survivors holed up within the quarantine zone, LA must seem like hell on Earth. But it's *more* perilous for the zombies shuffling around the gated communities of Bel-Air, the lobby of the Halperin Hotel and the sands of Venice Beach. After all, there's a maniac running around with an arsenal of weapons, designed to leave limbs dangling loose, jaws hanging off, stomachs torn open and skulls smashed in. Having sliced up the City Of Angels into large chunks for its not-*quite*-open world, Dambuster Studios invites you to do the same to its present incumbents, giving you thousands of undead to kill and roughly as many ways to dispatch them.

After a torturous nine-year development, *Dead Island 2* doesn't bear as many scars as you might expect – certainly not as many as you inflict throughout its single-minded campaign. The equivalent of a three-chord punk song, it commits to its gruesome MO wholeheartedly. Not that there are many whole hearts left – or, for that matter, any other organs or limbs you care to mention – once we've gone to work with a flaming pike, a nail-studded baseball bat, a kukri reinforced with a *second* blade, and a sledgehammer suffused with caustic chemicals that melt anything its bludgeoning metal head comes into contact with.

Zombies are not – and shouldn't be – smart opponents. The ones here, however, are satisfyingly reactive targets, and not just in the way they stagger back or spin around or fall apart when struck: the damage you deal is visible in the way blades tear through clothing *and* flesh. Whether you're wielding something sharp or blunt, landing an attack is as simple as pressing the right trigger or holding it down and releasing for a more forceful blow – though that requires stamina, and you'll be left gasping for breath if you keep swinging or stabbing before you've caught it. When pistols, rifles and shotguns come into play (their ammunition sufficiently limited to make them only an occasional option), they're aimed and fired in the time-honoured fashion. With a melee weapon equipped, the same combination of buttons throws it – a boon when you need room to heal.

The zombies' unpredictable movements mean that the timing for a dodge (nudge the stick in any direction while holding the left bumper) takes a while to nail. Blocking is simpler, though it's only by raising a protective arm as they lurch forward that you'll stun them, leaving them exposed to a grisly close-quarters counter that does huge damage. If that doesn't outright kill them, when they're down you can stomp their skulls into what looks like cherry compote. (Amusingly, this prompts the legend 'Maimed!' – we're no doctors, but we dare say it's a little more terminal than that.) Additional abilities, and boosts to your current ones, meanwhile, are available in the form of equippable cards, affording you ground pounds, dash strikes and more. And since you're infected, too – albeit with a degree of immunity that means you won't fully succumb to zombification – you can sporadically launch into a feral rage.

You're never short of options to fight back, in other words. An early moment when you throw a weapon to knock down a flaming tyre hints at the potential for environmental experimentation, though whenever such opportunities arise you rarely feel like the architect of destruction. Everything is too clearly laid out for you: there's a 'here's one we prepared earlier' quality to the way sparking wires are always found close to puddles, or jerry cans next to gas canisters or explosive barrels. Any effort to set up something more elaborate will more likely than not alert a zombie, and often it's simpler just to wade into the fray, or use one of your two current 'curveballs' – special items that come with cooldowns.

Yet that term is misleading, since there's nothing surprising about any of them. The first you get, meat bait, serves as a useful distraction throughout – and while your opponents are chowing down, you might opt to toss a Molotov or a pipe bomb. An electrically charged shuriken is a marginally more original option, if hardly inspiring. And the same goes for your opponents: among the tougher variants you'll find bulked-up brutes, wild-haired shriekers whose piercing cry attracts local packs, and pustulous bloaters that projectile vomit toxic gobs. Still, it's satisfying to reduce them to kit form, since many grant you a new weapon with which to go to work, as you pick a weaker target for some close-up facial reconstruction, like an unusually violent spin on *Super Mario 64*'s title screen.

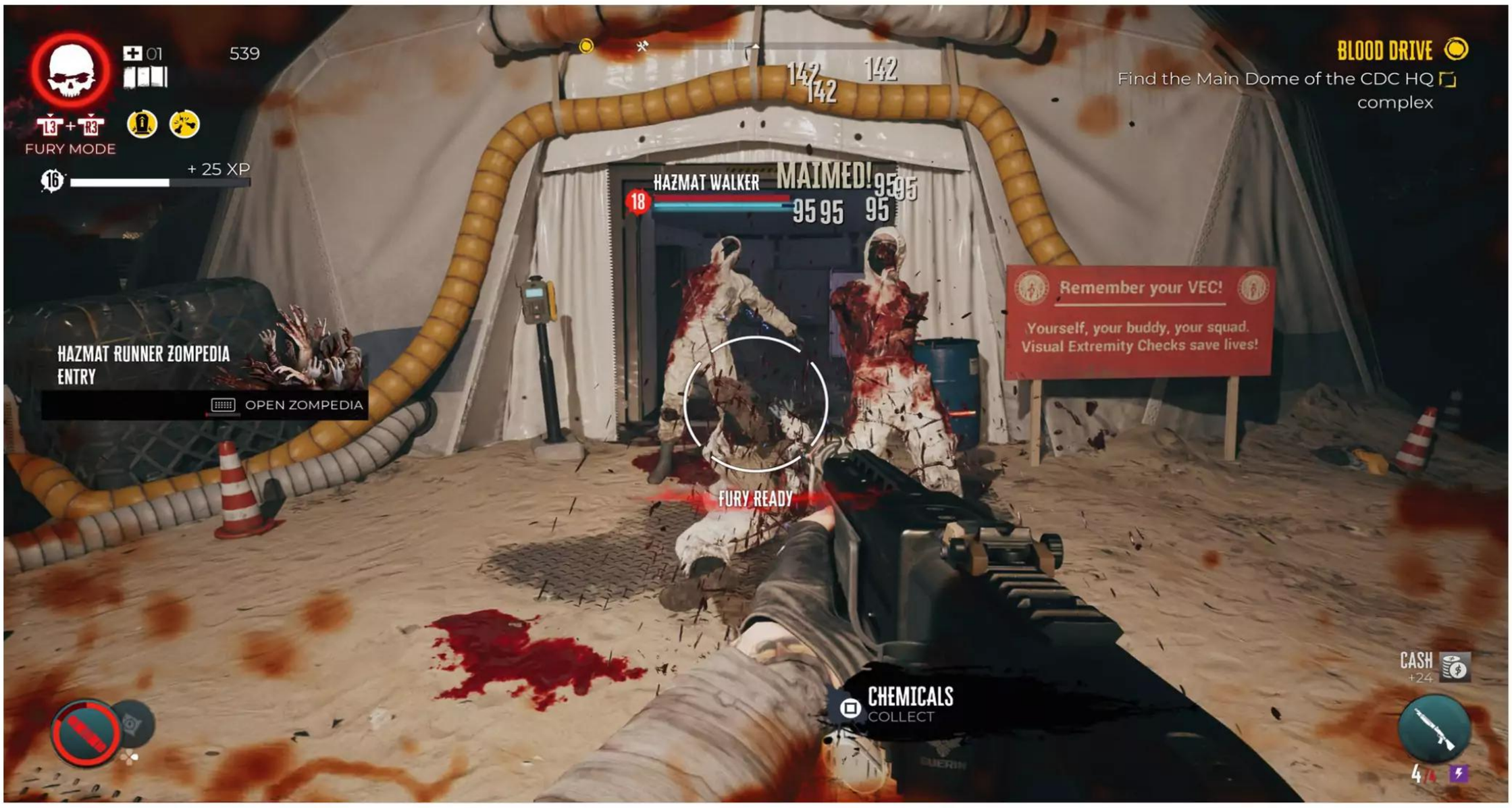
Alas, at times, *Dead Island 2* becomes similarly overstretched. Sequences where you're asked to hunt for gate codes or circuit breakers, or light puzzles involving turning levers or valve wheels, are tedious ways to pad things out when the threats are sufficiently spread out to make for natural breathers. And it struggles to escalate things in an enjoyable way, its RPG trappings all but forcing you to pursue side goals for experience to avoid encounters becoming attritional: if you're only marginally below the recommended level, you'll find enemy health bars are sturdier than their broken bodies suggest. The numbers-go-up design also makes a nonsense of the improvised weapons you can pick up – why would one identical-looking scaffold pole or rebar be so much more powerful than another?

But if, as the end nears, its unswerving focus seems less of an asset than in its early hours, *Dead Island 2* has emerged from development hell in more robust shape than we could have expected. Certainly, there is enough potential in a refined and updated version – one that finds room for more immersive sim-style experimentation – to leave us pondering something that seemed unthinkable going in. *Dead Island 3*? It doesn't seem quite such a terrible idea after all.

6

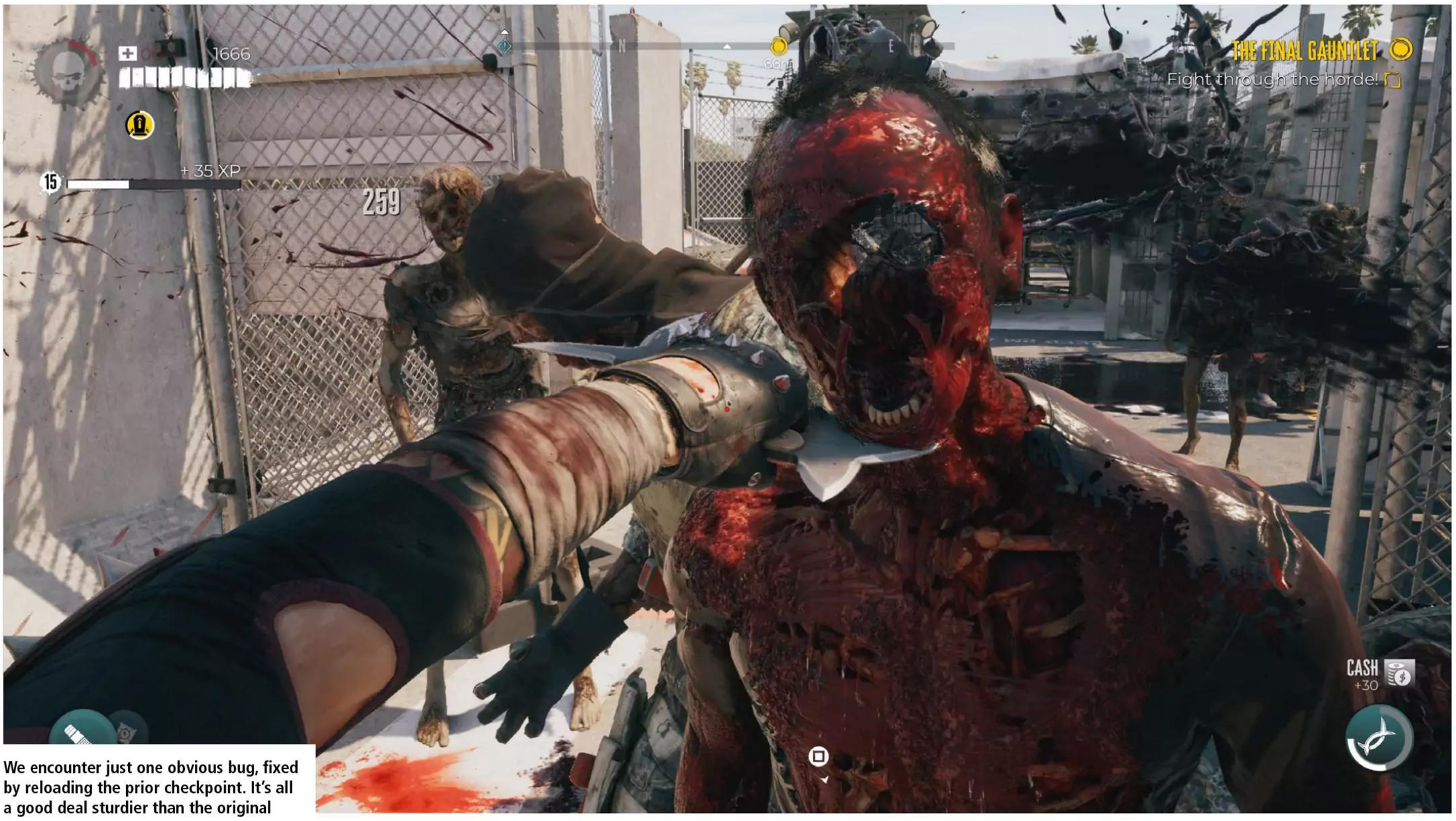
The game has emerged from development hell in more robust shape than we could have expected

DANI CALIFORNIA
An introductory sequence gives you precious little time to get acquainted with the half-dozen playable survivors, such that you can't exactly make an informed choice of whom to spend the next 15 or so hours with. Suffice it to say that we end up happy with our pick. Hailing from Cork, Dani (voiced by Michelle Fox) has a wry sense of humour that serves as a welcome counterpoint to the unfolding mayhem – we've not heard so many *feck*s since The Banshees Of Inisherin. Indeed, while we'd never suggest the writing here matches the wit of Martin McDonagh's award-botherer, it mines a similarly rich seam of mordant humour. Fox's wonderfully deadpan delivery provides several solid laughs, while one optional discovery results in the guiltiest guffaw we've had in a long time.



ABOVE During story missions, your objective will sometimes simply be 'kill 'em all!' – taking on large groups is often more entertaining than fighting bosses, not least when you can drop-kick weaker zombies into a toxic pool

MAIN Shotguns in particular can be useful to buy you some space, but given the relative paucity of ammo (and the cost of crafting more), you're better off spending your money on a good melee weapon.
ABOVE Human characters are well realised, with effective use of performance capture, though occasionally the game's dialogue seems out of sync with its visuals, making the experience a bit like watching a badly dubbed B-movie.
LEFT Any weapons to which you grow attached can be upgraded to match your current level – it'll cost you plenty, but we're happy to pay through the nose for a pike that can set zombie heads on fire



We encounter just one obvious bug, fixed by reloading the prior checkpoint. It's all a good deal sturdier than the original

Post Script

Why Dead Island 2's best-in-class gore is no small achievement

The crescent blades are classed as a Frenzy weapon in *Dead Island 2*. This means, as opposed to the Maiming-class weapons (useful for limb removal), the brute-force Bulldozer class and the Headhunter types (take a wild guess), you can mash the right trigger to swing away wildly, sacrificing power for speed. But it's when we slow things down a little that they have their most devastating effect. Tapping L1 as a zombie reaches to grab us, we block the attack just in time, leaving it stunned as an icon over its chest encourages us to press the Square button. We duly follow the prompt, as we have many times before with other weapons, pressing R2 once, then again before we're even asked, plunging the blades into the zombie's skull in grisly close-up. But then, when they're removed, we recoil from the screen. To our shock, there is now a huge, gaping hole where our attacker's face used to be – and through that gap we can see another zombie approaching.

Since George Romero's 1968 classic Night Of The Living Dead popularised the zombie movie, this particular subgenre of horror has been synonymous with gore. Horror fiction needn't feature gore to shock us, of course – some of the scariest examples of the same are entirely bloodless – but whenever the undead are involved, the two tend to go hand in hand. Plenty of studies have explored the effect on such explicit violence on the human brain, such that there's little point in us outlining why many find such gruesomeness so appealing – suffice it to say that it can even have a positive effect, not least in the way it allows viewers (or in this case players) to process horrifying scenarios in a safe, controlled environment.

The astonishing mainstream success of The Walking Dead franchise demonstrates both our voracious appetite for grisly thrills and how boundaries have been pushed farther and farther: the kind of flesh-ripping, eye-gouging scenes enjoyed by millions of viewers in recent times would doubtless have fallen foul to the censors in the decades before. It's rare, in other words, to be surprised or repulsed by zombie fiction in this day and age; you need only turn to p116 to find an example that left us distinctly underwhelmed, which casts *Dead Island 2*'s achievements in an even more favourable light. Indeed, though it's disappointing that they're all performed with the same combination of buttons, the game's inventively horrible close-up kills serve as an incentive to mix up your approach in combat. And, for that matter, to seek out what's hidden off the critical path: part of the appeal, after all, of getting your hands on a new weapon is the shiver of excitement as you wonder: 'What might *this* do to a zombie's face?'

Beyond the disreputable pleasures of its violence and the many creative expressions thereof, *Dead Island 2*'s detailed splatter taps into something fundamental about the appeal of videogames as a medium: the action/response feedback loop. When we pick up a game, we all want to feel that what we are doing has a tangible impact. Though one of the complaints we have about Dambuster's sequel is that we have relatively little effect on our environment – even if there is something pleasurably transgressive about spilling blood and guts in a once-pristine Beverly Hills mansion – there's no denying the impact of our inputs on its undead inhabitants. (And, for that matter, in witnessing their response to the human presence; one of the game's most entertaining cutscenes involves an obnoxious character getting a particularly nasty comeuppance.)

When we talk about videogames generating a strong emotional response, it's almost exclusively in the context of what might make us cry. Perhaps it's past time, then, that we acknowledged the games that make us flinch. With that in mind, the disgust – and, yes, the horrified glee – *Dead Island 2* provokes is surely something to be celebrated. ■

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"I like that there's tons of devs here. It's a really good community with lots of really good talks about making games, design etc. And getting to meet people in person, making personal connections is the coolest part."

John Romero, Romero Games

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The Last Worker

Given the recent developments in generative AI, concern about robots taking over our jobs is surely at an all-time high. And so, while its dystopian future is built from an earlier iteration of these fears – that automation would replace the labour of our bodies, not our minds – *The Last Worker* arrives feeling more of the moment than writer-director Jörg Tittel and developer Wolf & Wood could ever have expected. At least, when it comes to *this* one issue in particular, because this science-fiction satire plucks from a much broader range of today's hot topics.

Top of the agenda are the effects of consumerism and corporate greed on our delicate ecosystem, and on people, at the top and bottom: the egomaniacal tech billionaires who are empowered by it, and the fulfilment-centre workers who keep their machine ticking along. Your character, Kurt, is one of the latter – the last on Earth, in fact. Over the two decades he has spent in the employ of Jüngle (the resemblance of which to any real-life online retail giant is surely coincidental, our lawyers advise), every other human on the payroll has been replaced by robots, who do the work without pay or toilet breaks. Kurt, though, has somehow plodded on.

You join him in his day-to-day routine, piloting a kind of hover skiff around a warehouse where shelves stretch as far as the eye can see, fulfilling literal fetch quests with the add of a Gravity Gun-like device. Once you've located the right parcel and tugged it off the shelf, you must inspect it for damage and determine whether it is the specified size and weight, a process that feels a little like *Papers, Please*'s document inspection in three dimensions. You carry it over to the appropriate pipe – sending it out into the world if correct, or into 'recycling' if not – then begin the process again, and again, until your shift is over.

It is disturbingly easy to get caught up in this loop. At the end of each shift, you're ranked on speed and accuracy, and assigned a letter grade. The actual process is not especially pleasurable, moment to moment – your mechanical steed handles awkwardly, and the combination of inputs required to reel in and deposit packages is confusing enough that we frequently fire orders off into the abyss by accident. Nonetheless, chasing a J-rank (for 'Jüngle', naturally) is all it takes to turn us into a model employee, always trying to squeeze in just *one* more package before clocking off. At some point, it sinks in that this how this work is gamified in reality, and it's hard not to feel a little ashamed, and to reflect on the kinds of behaviours it is trying to instil in workers. (See also the orange plastic bottle mounted on your skiff, which seems more likely intended for filling rather than emptying, if you catch our drift.)

We can't decide quite how much intent to assign to the fact that these sections are more satisfying than anything else *The Last Worker* pulls from its mechanical grab-bag. The game tries its hand at hacking puzzles, stealth sections and, eventually, combat, but all feel considerably weaker than the daily grind. This might be a mimetic stroke of genius, or just a natural shortcoming of the game's scope. Either way, there's no denying that the warehouse sections provide *The Last Worker*'s most effective bit of satire.

Elsewhere, the game is as interested in making you laugh as making you think, with a sense of humour perhaps best exemplified by the items inside each parcel. After drop-off is complete, a clip plays, revealing the nature of your cargo. Baby VR goggles. Edible toilet paper. Full-body condom. Selfie handgun. Golden shower head. As should be apparent from that list, Tittel is not afraid to be juvenile, and seems to take a Verhoeven-esque glee in transgressing. At the beginning of each shift, you're asked to greet the day with the Jüngle salute, a gesture that, performed with your own hands in VR, will look to anyone watching like a Sieg Heil.

Occasionally managing to raise a chuckle, the script can feel a little flat at times. Which, when the game frequently insists on holding you in place while characters spout dialogue, can be a problem. The dialogue in question is delivered perfectly well, by a talented cast that includes Jason Isaacs in a borderline unhinged turn as robotic companion Skew, but there's only so much that can be done with characters who don't have limbs or facial expressions, and the movements of the plot never manage to get us invested in their lives.

At its worst, *The Last Worker*'s narrative fritters away a provocative premise. The game's broad position is one with which we're inclined to agree, but the story never deepens its points beyond the initial pitch. It certainly lacks the lived-in nuance of what *Norco* and *Citizen Sleeper*, for example, have to say about the gig economy. While there are reasonable observations about corporate euphemism and borrowed 'progressive' aesthetics, these are ultimately inessential to the real thrust of the plot, which sticks to a well-trodden path – before forking, at the game's close, in three potential directions.

Following a rather route-one happy ending and another that unexpectedly goes for *BioShock Infinite*-style both-sides-ism, we eventually wander into a conclusion that satisfies the Goldilocks Principle. The fact that we come to it last underlines how hard it is to line up with Kurt's motivations, but the events that unfold have a measure of nastiness to them that feels *just right*, with a climactic twist that actually seems to have something to say about all those big issues *The Last Worker* promised to tackle at its outset. These are important topics which are at the front of many minds right now, and we can't help but wish we'd played the game retrospectively suggested by that ending, one that really does its ideas justice.

6

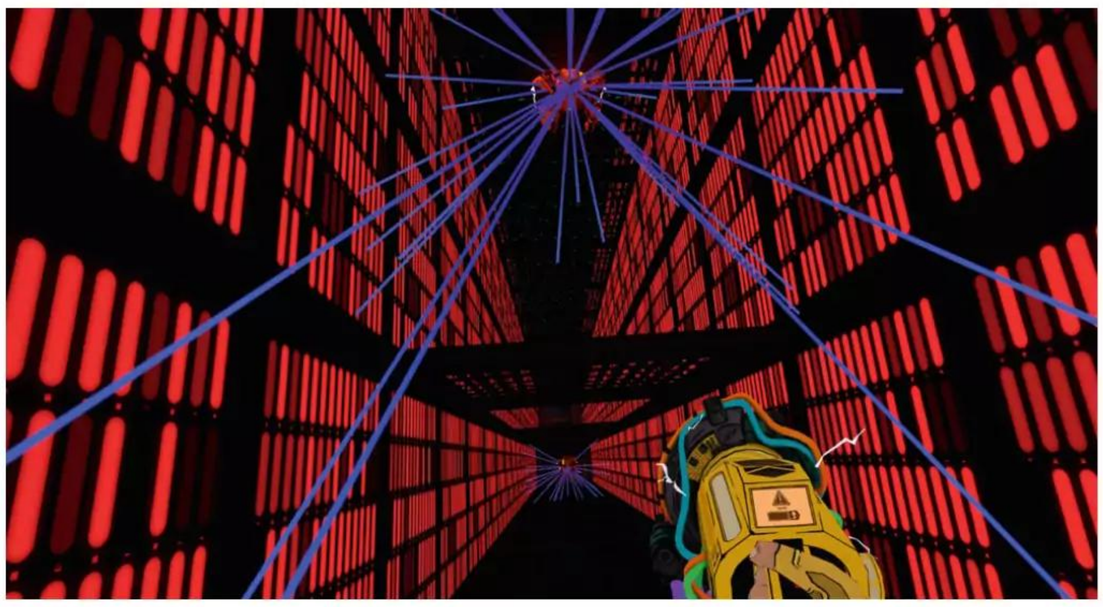
Developer Oiffy, Wolf & Wood Interactive
Publisher Wired Productions
Format PC, PCVR, PS5 (tested), PSVR2 (tested), Switch, Xbox Series
Release Out now

A clip plays, revealing the nature of your cargo. Baby VR goggles. Edible toilet paper. Full-body condom

HEADS UP

If you choose to play *The Last Worker*, we'd advise doing so in VR if at all possible. We can't say we noticed many especially cunning uses of PSVR2's features, but it does run perfectly well on the hardware, and when we switch over to the 'flat' PS5 version, we immediately find ourselves missing the extra field of view afforded by VR. Most important of all, though, is the requirement to act out everything (Jüngle salute included) with your hands, which adds some much-needed weight to the game's fairly simple mechanics – manually giving objects the Gravity Gun treatment is a VR mechanic that seems unlikely ever to get old.

ABOVE As you rescue this sorrowful-looking cow, which is intented to be ground into a neat cube of meat ready for shipping out to customers, a Tannoy announcement brags about the welfare of Jüngle-brand beef



MAIN Hacking puzzles have you rotating blocks to match the pattern on your gun-mounted screen – tugging them with your Jüngle gun is a little fiddly but, hey, at least it's not *Pipe Mania* again.
ABOVE In theory, virtual reality is a perfect fit for stealth, letting you peer and hide physically. Here, though, we often find it difficult to judge how much of our hulking mechanical form will be visible.
LEFT Jason Isaacs' Skew aside, the star turn here comes from David Hewlett as corporate overlord Josef Jüngle, a role that provides plenty of self-satisfied corporate doublespeak to chew on

Post Script

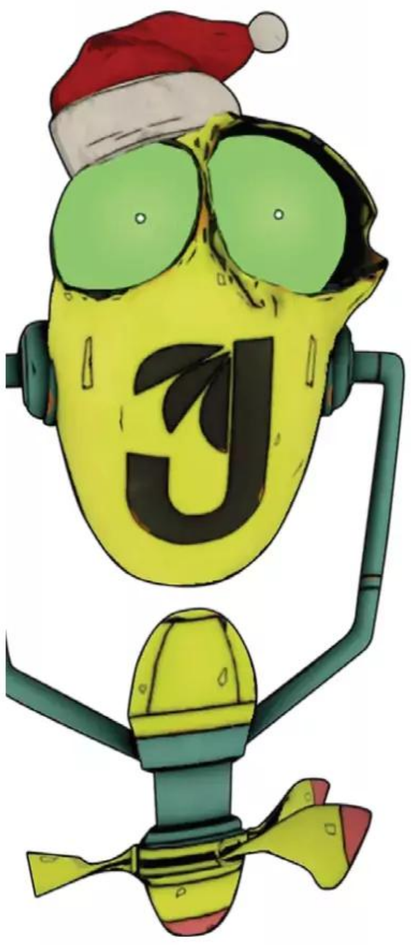
Q+A: Jason Isaacs, actor (Skew)

Jason Isaacs is a fixture on just about every conceivable screen, whether in cinemas in The Death Of Stalin or on TV in Star Trek: Discovery. But his resume also includes many videogames, including Marvel's *Midnight Suns*, *El Shaddai*, the 2016 reboot of Hitman – and now *The Last Worker*, in which he plays your robotic companion, Skew. Sitting down with Isaacs in a plush BAFTA screening room, conversation wanders from unexpected character accents to the end of the world.

This is far from the first time you've acted in a videogame, but what was it that attracted you to this project in particular?
Jörg Tittel, who created the game, is one of the most insane people I've ever met. He has creative ideas that are completely unrealisable. And then he realises them. I met him first because he did a graphic novel called Rickey Rouse Has A Gun and wanted to make a live-action movie of it. It seemed like he'd be taking on the Chinese government and copyright laws and Disney – but, actually, we nearly made it. And then the pandemic came. Jörg said, "I've got this idea", and I was like, "Well, that's even madder than Ricky Rouse". But it was the end of the world as we knew it. We were all in lockdown, all in isolation – it felt like nothing would ever be the same again. And maybe we were fiddling while Rome burned, but we had a good time recording our dialogue. Even though we were all locked in our homes, we were able to do something very unusual. We recorded together – we were connected digitally, across the world. I've done a lot of animation and videogames in my life, and you always record solo. The only other time I've ever actually been in a studio with other actors was Star Wars Rebels. [Ólafur Darri Ólafsson] and I knew each other already, and we got to improvise a lot, and [that produced] all these ideas – for instance, the notion of making Skew, my character, Scouse.

Did you have a lot of input into Skew's characterisation, then?
Well, the character was Jörg's idea, he just let me loose. He wanted mischief, he wanted trouble. Skew, as a co-bot, was programmed to be like any of the digital assistants we rely on today, but with the advanced version of the AI we're currently all being told to be terrified of, for very good reason. He's got a Scouse accent, but he occasionally reverts to his original American accent [as he jumps between his preset programming and his jailbroken self]. What seems clear – clear to me, anyway – is that he's got feelings. First of all, he's funny. I come from Liverpool – that's my natural accent – and everybody in Liverpool is a stand-up comedian, even the most unfunny people. There's a kind of cultural pressure: when you open your mouth, don't be earnest – say something sarcastic. So that fed into the jailbroken version of Skew.

"I have a terribly addictive nature. And I *did* play games, until they became my entire life. That's all I thought about"



As you say, you've worked on a lot of videogames before now, but what's your relationship with them like as a player?
I have a terribly addictive nature. And I *did* play games, until they became my entire life. That's all I thought about, day and night. *Tetris*, I'm afraid I was one of those people who is lucky they didn't have to go to *Tetris* rehab. I saw shapes behind people. I dreamt of blocks. All of life was just something that got in the way of me going home and beating my high score. It was like that with *Space Invaders*, too, when I was a teenager. And going right back, when I was 13 a friend of my dad bought a decommissioned *Pong* machine from an amusement arcade, and I got it and put it on silent and played it through the night in my bedroom. So there was a point in the '90s when I stopped playing games, because I recognised that if I didn't, I would have no life of any kind. They work *too well* on me. I get the dopamine hit, both with games and with modern tech, with the infinite scroll. I have to be extremely wary of how I give my life to them. Other people can pick them up and put them down. I can't do that.

When you're making a game like this, which wants to wrestle with questions of late-stage capitalism and its effect on the world, does it change the way you think about those things yourself?
I think about that stuff a lot, because I have kids. I feel like I've had a decent innings, but with what's going on in Eastern Europe right now, it could all be over very quickly, with nuclear missiles, or it could be over reasonably slowly, with climate change, which is already massively affecting the world. In parallel with that, nation states are becoming less and less important. It's individuals and corporations who run and own the world and dictate the way it's going – and are seemingly immune to any kind of regulation. So, yeah, I do think about it. I'm a terrible catastrophist. So this plays right into my worst fears, but there is – at least in the game – hope. I thought that when the pandemic started – 'OK, phew, something else will emerge from the ashes of what is clearly going wrong' – but it didn't. And things have gone back to relatively normal but, you know, normal is shifting. We're on a path to somewhere catastrophic, unless things change. And I'm not saying the game is going to change that. But it's a reminder of those things, in an engaging and entertaining way. ■

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Deceive Inc

Developer Sweet Bandits Studios
Publisher Tripwire Presents
Format PC, PS5 (tested), Xbox Series
Release Out now

You can listen back to the exact moment Ubisoft coined the term 'social stealth', onstage at E3 2006, on YouTube. But the genre kickstarted by *Assassin's Creed* has since been largely abandoned by triple-A studios – bequeathed to indie developers who have begun to explore the multiplayer potential of hiding in plain sight for themselves. *Deceive Inc* is the latest development in that story. Created by a team of former triple-A hands, it carries DNA from extraction shooters such as *Hunt: Showdown*, while also embracing social stealth as its core mechanic in a way no big-budget publisher would today.

It tasks you and several other players with competitive corporate espionage – infiltrating the vast vault of a swanky mansion, underwater hotel, office tower or tropical holiday resort to steal a briefcase and make your getaway in a flying car. Since there's only one briefcase, it's not just the defences of the vault you'll have to contend with, but your rivals, who reveal themselves now and again for messy firstperson shootouts.

Most of the time, though, you'll be acting a part: nonviolently navigating a sprawling indoor environment disguised as a partygoer, guard or staffer. Going unnoticed requires you to mimic the jolting cadence of the NPCs around you: walking a while, pausing to stare into the middle distance, and then heading off in another direction. Perhaps you'll sit on a chair, or wash your hands at a sink. Sweet Bandits Studios has done a marvellous job of muddying the waters by teaching its AI to err in human-like ways – you'll see guests break into jogs, and walk into places they don't belong. A single slip-up is not the smoking gun you might expect.

Before long, you recognise subtler tells in fellow players: an unbroken gait, a tendency to zigzag between valuable items, a trail of opened ammo boxes. You'll want to be sure of your target before opening fire, since doing so inevitably involves blowing your own cover, drawing the attention of guards and rivals. Your performance is complicated by the actions you'll need to carry out simultaneously. Hacking a locked door, opening a safe, buying ammo – all cost intel, a resource collected from computer and device screens all over the map. A closed drawer might conceal intel, but opening one is a calculated risk, predicated on the hope that no one is watching.

Most dangerously, you'll want to break into the security rooms dotted around the level, which house not only the best upgrades but the levers that must be pulled before the vault will open. As in *Hitman*, an appropriate uniform and keycard will grease the wheels of espionage, but there's a hierarchy to the costumes. Some areas are so secure that even security guards aren't invited.

These chokepoints are designed to throw rivals into close proximity, where the façade quickly breaks down. Once it does, you learn there's no such thing as a swift, clean kill in *Deceive Inc*. Non-automatic weapons are the standard, and players can take a few firm hits before going down. It's a setup that turns each battle into a panicked, strafing dance, punctuated by potshots and the use of gadgets such as portable turrets. These loud and public displays can pull in other participants – particularly in team mode, where a third trio might recognise the opportunity to pounce on weakened opponents.

Impressively, however, *Deceive* *Inc* goes quiet just as quickly as it goes loud. Disguises are swiftly restored outside combat, and a host of tools enable you to disappear fast – claiming temporary invisibility, or transforming into a waste paper bin. As of launch, Sweet Bandits has already found an audience more interested in melting into the background in creative fashion than racking up kills for their own sake.

After all, it's only ever about the briefcase. That single objective allows for all sorts of flexibility in the minutes between spawn and extraction. You might arrive on the scene tricked out with cover-breaking tripwires and door traps, content to land your peers in trouble rather than incite it yourself. Or you could take an inflatable trampoline and sniper rifle to the fight, bounding onto the rooftops near a vault exit to wait out the would-be victor. Some approaches are more effective than others, but all are valid, thanks to the systemic FPS fundamentals into which every aspect of *Deceive Inc* is plugged.

Some, mind you, will consider this genre mashup a mismatch. The game's social stealth and shooting sides pull from fundamentally different skillsets – it can be frustrating to hunt down an opponent via perception and patience, only to flunk the firefight. While certain playable characters reduce the demands on your thumbs, a fast and reliable aim will always put you at an advantage during confrontation. And while crossplay was the smart choice for a project that depends on speedy matchmaking for its survival, we do wonder whether, in the land of the slow-loading revolver, the mouse-wielder is king.

Then there are the bugs, which at time of writing have resulted in three match-ending crashes over a 24-hour period, and occasionally sent our avatar into a spin when switching weapons. Yet we're inclined to forgive: *Deceive Inc*'s occasional unsteadiness belies its overall polish, which is accentuated by a first-class soul-revival soundtrack and the retrofuturism of its Bond lairs. When you're spending long minutes people-watching, it helps to have a few leonine ice sculptures to occupy the eye.

The team mode is all well and good, but it's in solo play that *Deceive Inc* shines. Here, you're given space to consider every gesture and interaction, and to let your brain run wild with all the gestures and interactions you're *not* seeing – the fellow spies gathering intel in the next bathroom, or passing by in the lobby. The trappings of high society barely conceal the violence yet to come, and the air crackles with anticipation.

8

The game's social stealth and shooting sides pull from fundamentally different skillsets

COSTUME QUEST
There's an expert layer of play tied to disguises in *Deceive Inc*. Yes, a guard outfit will enable you to infiltrate security rooms, but it also comes with expected forms of social interaction, and unavoidable responsibilities – not least an expectation that you'll run toward danger, rather than away from it. The opposite is true for a technician, who can be relied upon to run scared from gunfire, and will draw suspicion if they don't. Sometimes it's better to dress as a civvie, and to slip under the radar of players who will expect you to be rocking more authoritative garb. Or to mimic the staff, and take advantage of society's tendency to ignore the people watering plants and tending bar. Who says multiplayer shooters can't double as social commentary?

ABOVE You can get through a locked door with a keycard or, thrillingly, slip through on the coattails of an NPC that happens to have the proper type of access. RIGHT Levels such as Fragrant Shore channel the same sense of luxury and exclusiveness that makes the *Hitman* series tick

BELOW Engaging in animations such as sitting or admiring a painting can lend extra authenticity to your performance as a fake NPC

ABOVE Several players enter a match to begin with, drawing from a good range of costume options, but they're soon whittled down thanks to early slip-ups and the brief but deadly shootouts that inevitably follow

Everspace 2

Developer/publisher Rockfish Games
Format PC
Release Out now

Rockfish's sci-fi sequel junks the Roguelike format of its predecessor for the grand expanse of the open world. In many ways it typifies a formula honed by the likes of *Assassin's Creed* over several iterations – except, of course, that almost all of it takes place in the airless void of space. Vistas of rolling hills are thus replaced by the art of the skybox, painted with hula-hooped planetoids and splendid orange gas clouds, while towers and caves switch out for clusters of asteroids harbouring mineral deposits, and hanging space wrecks torn apart by some forgotten war.

That stratospheric difference gives this open world without a world a certain honesty. It places front and centre a reality that many examples of the genre obscure – that you don't explore their lands so much as beeline toward map markers, getting distracted by further markers that ping invitingly onto the HUD as you go. The concept of fast travel takes on a new meaning here as you belt across millions of miles in a minute in hyperspeed, with no pretence that the real estate between highlighted points of interest needs stuffing with empty-calorie morsels of interactivity.

Meanwhile, the optional diversions that do pop up are, well, genuinely diverting. Some turn out to be ambushes, some distress calls, and some enemy bases you can blast apart with your single-seater craft piece by piece. Others serve up the equivalent of tombs in *Assassin's Creed* games – locked treasure boxes within shipwrecks, perhaps surrounded by laser and mine traps, or stuck behind power points that need connecting to a battery or shields that need to be deactivated. These spaces are the antonym to the game's space battles, calling on you to crawl around the desolate shells like a gawping tourist.

Between these impromptu distractions, side missions and main objectives, *Everspace 2*'s loop of travel, fight, loot and shop spins smoothly. By the time we've gained the ability to leave the first solar system, effectively the end of act I, we've passed ten hours. It helps that the combat has enough about it to keep itself welcome, fight after fight. Tight ship control, including a handy boost-strafe for circling enemy vessels while exchanging fire, couples with a demand to consider the strengths of your build. Distance matters, both in knowing your effective assault range and not blundering into packs of armour-stripping drones. There's even almost a stealth element when you're approaching bases, again like those open-world games, where you might use asteroid cover to get close, and scope out the best angle of attack to avoid defence systems. Or you might rely on your ship's 'devices' – cooldown-limited specials that can disable enemies with a short-range EMP, say, or teleport you out of immediate danger.

Where these skirmishes fall a little short is in their ability to get the heart rate up. Lasers pew-pew as they should. Miniguns rattle. Flak cannons boom. But for what is ostensibly an action game, *Everspace 2* lacks a certain *Star Wars*-ness. Battles can become a matter of chasing red triangles around the screen's edges, while your boosters and primary weapons overheat with fussy rapidity. You're not exactly hurtling through Death Star trenches with TIE Fighters screaming behind you – a thrill that *Everspace 2*'s most immediate recent rival, *Chorus*, comes much closer to emulating.

Also, while the loot structures are quite rewarding, with each victory delivering at least one or two pieces of equipment that significantly alter or boost your ship's stats, actually collecting the stuff that floats out of your busted enemies is like having to sweep up after a bar brawl. To pull in objects with your tractor beam, you have to get within range and line them up with the front of your ship – tiresome manual labour. And since you need all the materials you can get to level up perks, and even lesser equipment is worth grabbing for spare parts, you feel obliged to suck everything up.

You're not exactly hurtling through Death Star trenches with TIE Fighters screaming behind you

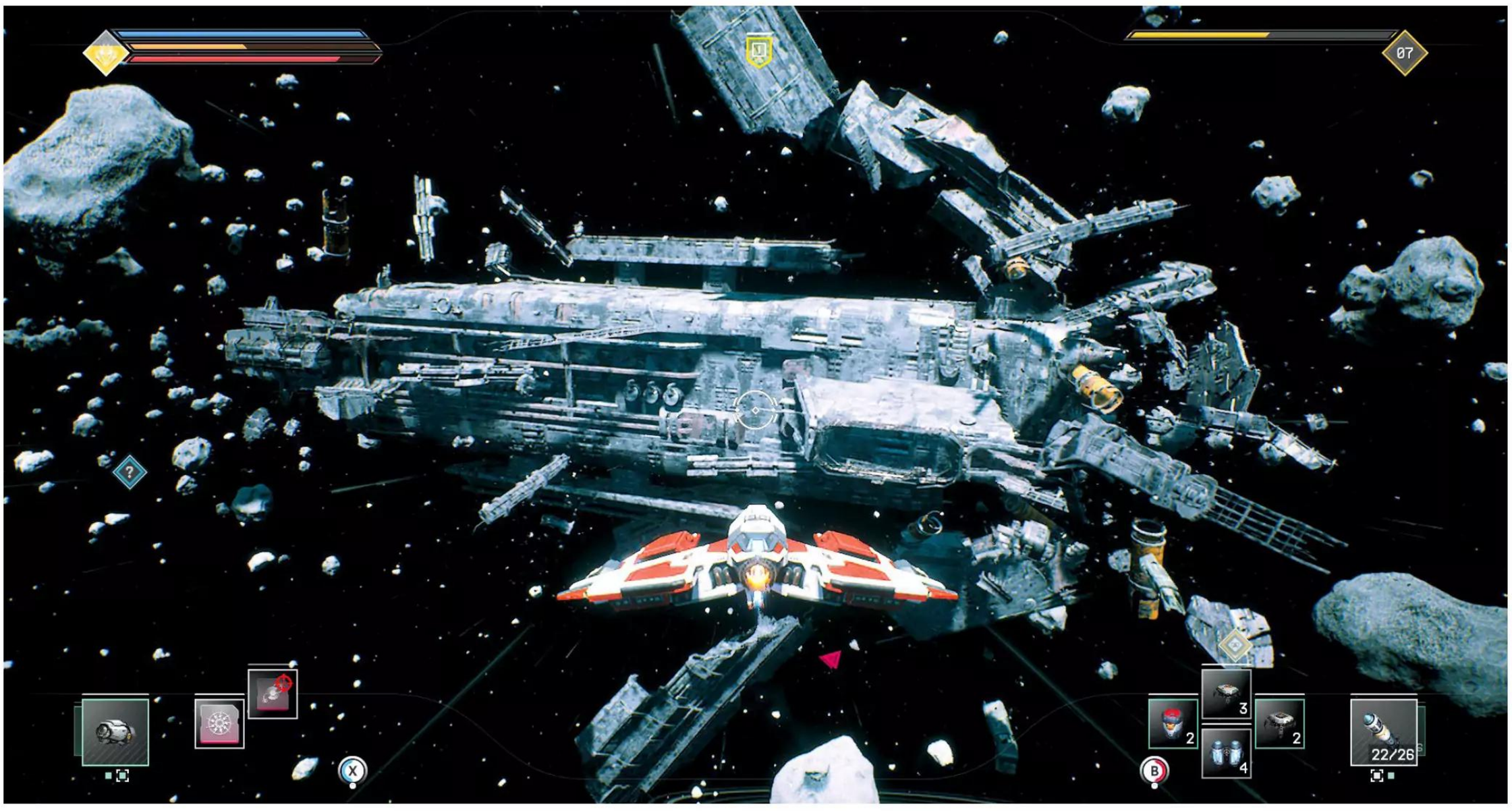
Or perhaps our diligence here, along with getting sidetracked between missions, tells of something else – that the story doesn't have much tractor-beam pull of its own. *Everspace 2*'s science fiction is comfortably generic, from the ship design to its corporate nemesis, to bland-as-they-come protagonist Adam. The latter's one noteworthy trait is that he's a clone, and there's some intrigue in the notion that he shares memories with previous versions of himself. But otherwise, the plot about building a rag-tag coalition to take on the big power takes too long to gather momentum. Like a Saturday morning cartoon, it's inoffensively disposable.

In later solar systems, we continue to care more about acquiring new equipment, including new ships, and flying to locations in the galaxy's extremities. In one far-flung corner, we find ourselves exploring a wreck in close proximity to a solar flare that roars radioactive heat in our direction, forcing us to dash between asteroids while tracking the components we need to complete a puzzle. This kind of discovery makes us want to keep visiting the question marks on the map.

Outside of such surprises, though, the loop loses its early lustre thanks to the sheer number of times it's expected to circle. There are seven solar systems in all, and only so much of what we find within distinguishes itself from those first ten hours. On a couple of occasions, we take advantage of the save states supplied with our review code that allow us to skip ahead a little, and our overriding feeling is that we haven't missed much. The story moves on and the numbers get bigger, but the enemy and mission types remain largely static. While Rockfish has created an accomplished open-world experience among the stars, then, it really needn't take up quite so much space.

7

SUCK IT AND SEE
Your ship's ability to grab and hold objects in some sort of stasis field then propel them away at speed is put to a variety of uses both in battle and out. Puzzles tend to revolve around pulling in energy spheres or batteries and delivering them to the matching socket, with added care required if the object is likely to explode if damaged. While fighting, you can suck in your own mines and spit them off at a specific target, as well as bombs launched from gun emplacements. Alternatively, you might opt to grab and chuck some floating debris, which is essential if you want to penetrate the shields of certain bosses on which normal weapons have no effect. When you're used to assisted aim and homing missiles, it can be a tricky challenge.



RIGHT When you dock and Adam leaves the comfort of his ship, story events play out in comic-book stills. **MAIN** Your starting ship is a solid all-rounder, with alternate models generally falling into fast-but-fragile or slow-tank categories. **BOTTOM** You can trade goods between sectors to help fill your coffers, but it's far from essential and involves a lot of travel

ABOVE Occasional planet-surface missions offer a welcome change of view and more tangible arenas to fight in across hand-crafted environments. Naturally, the proximity of terrain delivers a greater sense of speed here

Have A Nice Death

Developer Magic Design Studios
Publisher Gearbox Publishing
Format PC (tested), Switch
Release Out now

From *Death's Door* to *Grim Fandango* and even *Kentucky Route Zero*, it's become more commonplace for videogames to depict the afterlife as a macabre bureaucracy. *Have A Nice Death*'s rendition of the hereafter, then, isn't quite as imaginative as it would like to think it is – for better *and* worse, it's LucasArts' adventure of which we're most often reminded here. Yet this handsomely crafted Roguelike is glossy, taut and refined, even if it's lacking a little light at the end of the tunnel.

In this corporate afterlife, the Grim Reaper is a CEO presiding over a company now falling well out of his control, due to both his own negligence and that of his subordinates. So with his trusty scythe, he sets off to cut their losses and restructure, exploring the various departments that make up the afterlife before battling against their managers. Structurally speaking, *Have A Nice Death* is pretty standard genre fare: before each new attempt you have the opportunity to pick a weapon (or unlock new ones), choosing from a series of optional modifiers and selecting which items will appear during your forthcoming run.

It's a pity that it doesn't follow in *Hades'* footsteps, and afford you access to a full arsenal – each time you must carry your standard scythe and a randomly selected secondary weapon into battle. That disappointment is exacerbated when you find one that feels particularly satisfying to wield (the 'Diss-scythe', which can be thrown around on a string, is an instant favourite) and then the whims of the RNG deny you the opportunity to use it for an hour or two. The intent, clearly, is to encourage players to mix things up – an approach that works much better with regard to the range of complementary abilities, each with distinct timings and cooldowns to adjust to. These round out your moveset for the game's lightning-quick fights: between swings of your scythe you can launch throwing stars, rockets and tornadoes, to name but three.

As such, while there's the inherent genre frustration of a bad roll leaving you with a selection that's less than ideal, the magic of a winning combination is present and correct, too: equipping a meteor shower alongside an almighty claymore with a powerful upward and downward swing leaves us feeling positively unstoppable. The UI can occasionally prove a slight hindrance, with the arrangement of the onscreen slots failing to match the button layout on your controller – such that in the heat of the moment, it's a little too easy to confuse one attack for another. When your loadout is constantly changing, it makes the learning process more challenging than it needs to be, and given the rapid pace of combat that means we lose a couple of early runs to errant button presses. Still, a combination of fast and fluid animation and satisfying audio design makes the action feel moreish enough to forgive those shortcomings. The execution is impeccable, even if there is little that's particularly new or surprising.

Death himself is an amusingly grumpy fellow, in constant need of a cup of coffee to stay motivated

TOO MUCH ROPE
It's not unexpected for a game that views corporate culture through the lens of the afterlife to be morbid, but the game's tenor, broadly speaking, is quite cartoonish. Which makes the times it steps outside of that tone extremely jarring – such as the mini-boss encounter with a former employee who committed suicide, face bloated and wielding their noose as a weapon. In one respect, it's as cleverly conceived an enemy design as the game's best – and it makes for one of its most engaging fights, with the rope attacks cutting the screen into segments. Yet in a lightweight tale that tends to treat death in gently humorous fashion, it feels startlingly out of place: an odd inclusion in an otherwise harmless comedy adventure.

That said, developer Magic Design Studios manages to find a few ways to warm up these old bones. Its striking presentation – largely monochromatic, but with splashes of colour – means that, from a visual standpoint, this sits comfortably alongside other handsome 2D side-scrollers such as *Hollow Knight* and *Blasphemous*. The bureaucratic environments are lovingly detailed, while characters and enemies are novel in their designs, blending the supernatural with corporate mundanity: ghosts made out of discarded receipts are a fine example of the creativity on display, their paper torsos twisting and contorting as they attack. Characters are wonderfully expressive, too: Death himself is an amusingly grumpy fellow, in constant need of a cup of coffee to stay motivated, while his underlings are all eccentric bags of bones. From adoring secretaries to perpetually striking janitorial staff, the game's memorable supporting cast regularly ease the pain of a failed run. As, for that matter, does the joyous soundtrack, which carries the same humorous invention that made *Rayman Origins* such a joy. It's even similarly woven into play, since taking a hit produces a record-scratch noise that momentarily hits pause on the score.

Indeed, *Have A Nice Death* isn't particularly invested in the hardship you'd associate with a Roguelike, offering several difficulty options including an easy mode. Reaching the final boss of a department enough times, meanwhile, unlocks an express elevator straight to that encounter, giving you the choice of skipping the preceding levels if you'd rather hurry things along than force yourself to cut your way through another army of minions. Then again, you might want to ignore such shortcuts: the game does an admirable job of spicing up each run, sneaking in new enemies or optional boss fights to ensure that repetition is slow to set in.

Yet for all its qualities, in a post-*Hades* world, we find it hard to get deeply invested in a Roguelike that has so little in the way of narrative stakes. Outside of a few incongruously bleak gags, such as a suicidal employee who battles you with a noose (see 'Too much rope'), *Have A Nice Death* tends to keep things light – but as amusing as his struggles can be, the Grim Reaper's goals aren't particularly compelling. There is little reason to care about his need to clean up the company, so while its parody of office culture works well enough, it can sometimes feel a little outdated. If its satire had more bite, if its story cut as deep as Death's weapon of choice, we'd perhaps feel more motivated to commit to his quest. As it stands, this well-crafted and frequently funny adventure will keep you entertained in the moment, but won't exactly haunt your thoughts once you've set down your scythe.

7

LEFT One joy of a randomised Roguelike is the feeling of 'breaking' the game, and *Have A Nice Death* caters for this better than most examples thanks to Death's massive, spectacularly animated attacks and abilities. **BELOW** New perks and abilities are dished out quite regularly, but each one gets a dazzling introduction. **MAIN** We're hardly short of depictions of Death to crib from, but casting him as a tired CEO is an amusing spin, ultimately presenting him as more of a Grump Reaper

ABOVE Each department is rendered with a loving amount of detail, but visually the game is probably at its best when it's draped in lots of layers, with out-of-focus foreground detail helping to sell the sense of depth

Terra Nil

Developer Free Lives
Publisher Devolver Digital
Format Android, iOS, PC (tested)
Release Out now

For most of its duration, this self-styled 'reverse city builder' is, in fact, nothing of the sort. Rather, it's a *reskinned* city builder, one with eco-consciousness at the fore. As with most games in this genre, you start out with a barren wasteland, and your objective is to use your limited but growing means to ensure it flourishes. You must still supply power to buildings, piecing together an infrastructure while bearing your environment and its randomly generated topography in mind. And there is, as ever, a delicate equilibrium of resources to be maintained. Here, however, you're doing it to restore an ecosystem, before removing any evidence of human presence. *This* is where it really becomes a reverse city builder: once your efforts have satisfied the requirements for fauna to thrive, you must clean up after yourself, recycling every manmade structure in the region before taking off to help nature reclaim another part of the world.

And so, armed with your Beginner's Guide To Ecosystem Restoration (a weathered but handsomely illustrated tome that might be one of the best things about *Terra Nil*), you get to work. First, you need a power supply, although you can only place wind turbines down on rock. Around each of these you'll need to position toxin scrubbers, preferably spreading them as far apart as possible so as to cleanse larger patches of soil, ready for the irrigators that will turn brown into green, and in turn top up your resources. (It's unclear quite how this greenery affords you the funds to create new buildings; suffice it to say that this is far from the last instance of extremely questionable science you'll find here.)

With sufficient grassland you acquire the ability to fill dry river beds with a water pump, an excavator letting you create a new riverbed, but at the cost of poisoning the land immediately around it – an early example of a structure with pros *and* cons. Then again, you can turn that apparent negative to your advantage when it's time to carry out the next part of your brief, which requires a certain number of squares of shrubland, wetland and woodland. A solar amplifier allows you to start a controlled fire to create ash; any adjoining grass will go up in flames along with the fynbos, but the husks of burnt buildings can be used to plant a forest. Then comes some elegant repurposing as an irrigator becomes a hydroponium, creating a boggy area around it, before you begin tidying up after yourself, recycling all your buildings to construct an airship.

It's during this stage that you can start thinking about pursuing optional goals, placing down machines to increase temperature and humidity. The results are largely cosmetic, albeit charming to behold, from the appearance of moss on rocks to wildflowers sprouting on grassland and fungi in forests, while birds flock overhead and salmon surface near waterfalls. You need only obtain three animal species of a possible six before you're allowed to take off, but the appeal of seeing them in the wild is enough to encourage you to make the necessary adjustments to ensure their presence. Though in most cases, the restrictions on where anything can be placed means everything will already be in its right place; as such, your only challenge is figuring out which square to scan that is within reach of both ice and detoxified ocean, for instance, or a high perch with potential prey in range.

> Once your efforts have satisfied the requirements for fauna to thrive, you must clean up after yourself

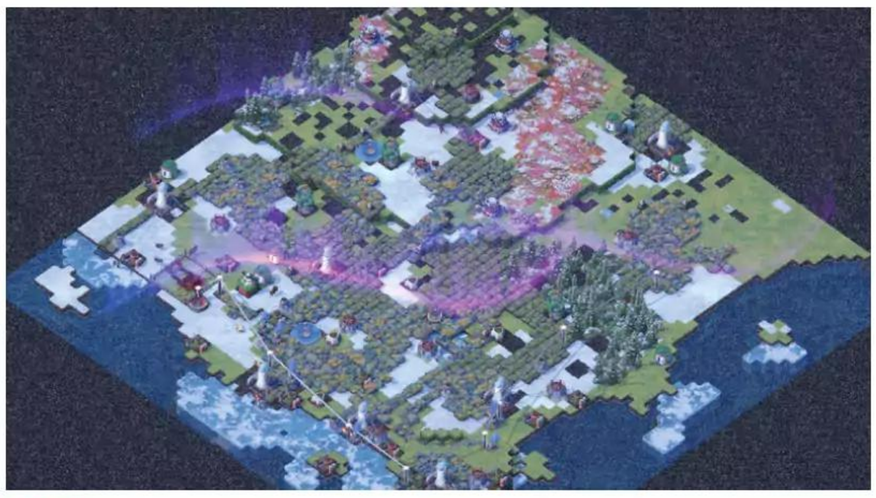
Each of the four areas presents a new set of problems, but by and large the processes are the same. In the tropical region, you need first to clean the surrounding oceans, while the next step sees you increase biodiversity through beaches, mangroves and rainforests; in the polar region it's about melting the permafrost before creating areas of tundra, forests and lichen-covered rock fields. A monorail network in the tropical region enables you to transport coral polyps to the sea to generate reefs; it's repurposed to make kelp forests in the icy waters of the polar biome, and in both cases the structure is placed atop an irrigator (such thrift is, in fairness, the stuff of eco-friendliness).

Elsewhere, your approach is largely determined by the landscape. To melt snow, you can use seismic detonators to bring lava (which can later be cooled into rock) to the surface – though only if placed close to a fissure. Limitations rarely afford room for creative solutions: shadecloth needed to create the humidity for a tropical rainforest to flourish must be connected to pillars arranged in triangles and built on the side of a cliff. With the number of resources generated by a given structure displayed before you put it down, you'll simply move your mouse around the map until you find the square where the number is highest.

If *Terra Nil* aims to encourage us to cherish the natural world (the button marked 'Appreciate' that lets you admire the fruits of your labours after the big cleanup certainly suggests as much), or at least to think more seriously about how we might have a positive impact on our environment, it often falls short. Once you've moved onto the next phase of a plan, you no longer have to concern yourself with the small matter of maintaining that delicate equilibrium: having inadvertently missed a bonus objective to attract migratory birds to the polar region, we raise the temperature to 19 degrees, which has surprisingly little effect on the thick snowfall or the ice floes upon which a colony of penguins happily waddles about. And though the game's meditative vibe is perfectly pleasant, its anti-humanist worldview is as bleak as any postapocalyptic adventure. Rather than suggesting ways we might work symbiotically with nature, it simply shows how we might make the world function without us before leaving it behind forever. Yes, the planet looks prettier than it did before we arrived, but this is a rare act of beautification that leaves a bitter aftertaste.

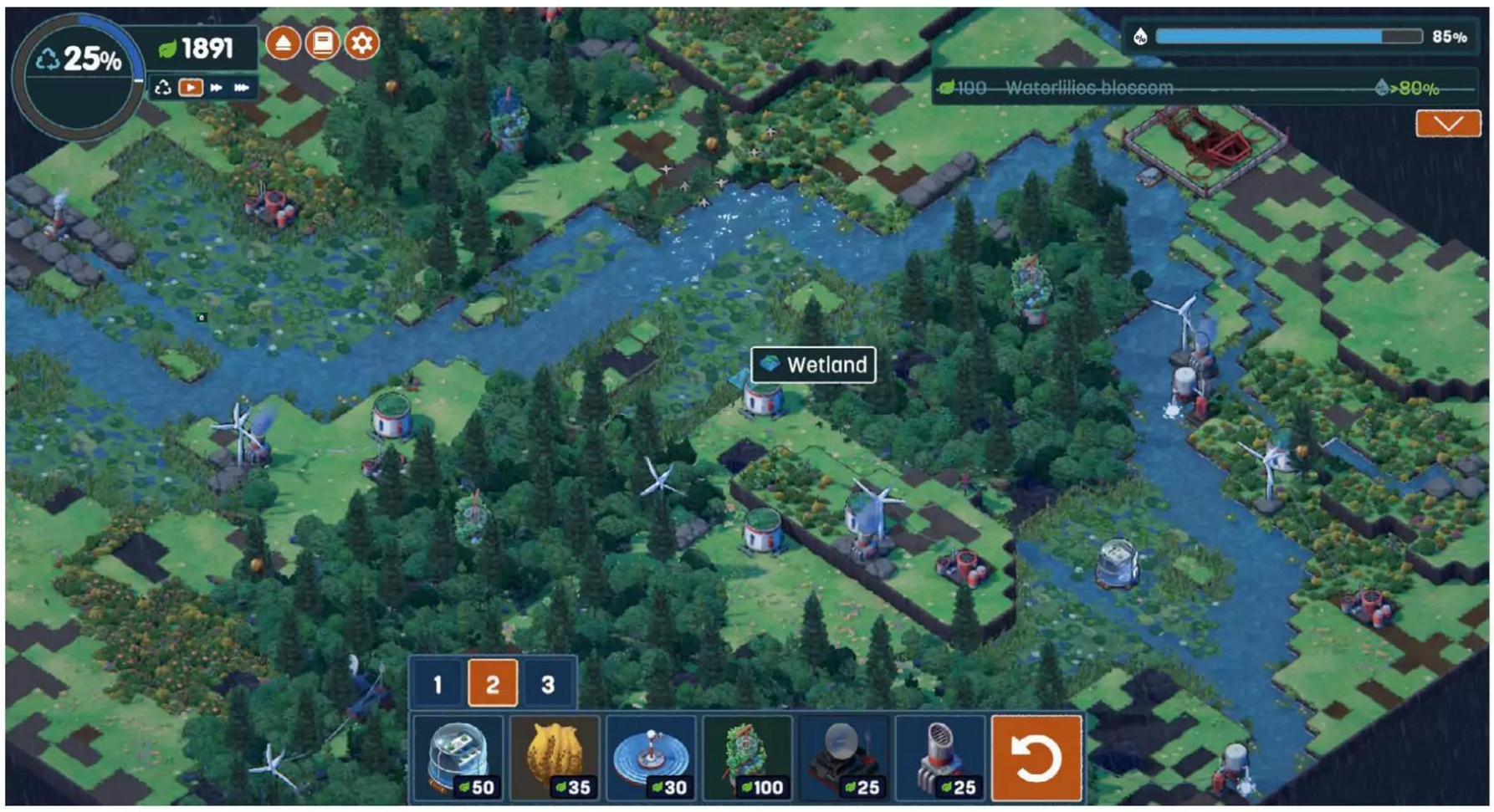
6

RUMBLE OF DISCONTENT
The guidebook outlines another "unique set of challenges" for the game's final environment, a flooded city. This briefly promises an unpredictable new aspect as your early work reduces the region's stability, causing the odd seismic tremor. Yet when the inevitable happens, the result is underwhelming: this scripted hazard simply involves another type of cleanup, one that is required to produce a new set of flora anyway, and with everything you need to resolve it handed to you. Your final task, meanwhile, is extended by an extra bit of business that resembles, of all things, *COD*'s Death From Above: viewing the world through a monochromatic window, you harvest seeds by lining up the most fecund areas in your crosshairs and pressing the big red fire button.



ABOVE Some optional objectives are in conflict with others, but once one has been achieved, it'll remain in place even if subsequent adjustments theoretically mean the conditions of its existence are no longer satisfied

TOP Zooming in close highlights some charming details – and a few graphical shortcomings. Tortoises that are larger than flamingos?
MAIN Some constructions feel like awkward solutions to problems of the game's own making. If rock formations don't generate in the right place, for example, a rock thrower allows you to reposition them so you can connect up monorail stations to form a network – though doing so means more buildings to tidy up later on.
RIGHT Perhaps the most gratifying reward is getting to hear the sounds of nature as the wasteland is steadily transformed. There's some outstanding foley work here: the crisp *crunch* of snow in the polar region is especially satisfying



The Dark Pictures: Switchback VR

Developer/publisher
Supermassive Games
Format PSVR2
Release Out now

For all that it strives to present itself as a potential future for the medium, VR game design often takes us back in time: to videogames' roots in the arcade, and even before that, their predecessors at the fairground. Rarely has that been more explicit than in *The Dark Pictures: Switchback*, a follow-up to PSVR1 launch title *Until Dawn: Rush Of Blood*. As in that game, you're seated in a cart that trundles along a fixed track, armed with twin pistols to shoot the targets that line your route. The only real differences are the setting – here transplanted to Supermassive's annual horror anthology – and the titular feature, which allows you to change route at certain points by shooting a directional indicator (see 'Losing track').

At its core, *Switchback* remains *House Of The Dead* by way of ghost trains and shooting-gallery carnival games. Much like those precursors, it does its best work at a bodily level. The first time a zombie pops up unexpectedly, right by your face, it's hard not to let out a yelp. The effect is only amplified by PSVR's 3D audio (especially since the Pulse headset shuts out the rest of the world), but, like all jumpscares, it fades with repetition. When the track plunges into a steep drop, though, we never fail to feel a tug in the pit of our stomach – although, in a presentation format notoriously plagued by motion sickness, it's up to you whether this is a good or bad thing.

Like many fairground rides in the modern era, *Switchback* gives the impression of something that has seen better days. For all the limited scope of its on-rails action, it's far from a graphical showcase for the hardware. Most levels are blanketed in a foggy twilight that helps to hide rough edges at a distance, but also emphasises the gauzy 'mura' effect that has also been a source of irritation among consumers with other early PSVR2 releases. And up close, it's hard to miss the shabbiness of its character models – a persistent problem with a cast of monsters that are all too eager to get in your face. This might matter less were they more dynamic in motion, but *Switchback*'s hordes merely shamble blindly towards you, swallowing bullets until suddenly it's time for them to drop dead. VR has inherent gains for shooting mechanics – not least the novelty of being able to freely aim with two hands, untethered from the direction in which you're looking – but also a stricter requirement to sell the impact of those shots; these zombies barely flinch.

Supermassive has knowingly made a throwback here, both to *Rush Of Blood* and to games that came well before. The result, though, feels old-fashioned in the least complimentary of ways.

4

LOSING TRACK
Switchback's one big idea is, on paper, a smart adaptation of the divergent narratives that have made the *Dark Pictures* games so popular, literalising those branches into the geography of its levels. Given that some of the game's better set-pieces are hidden along these side routes, the greatest fear *Switchback* manages to evoke is of missing out. But with each level lasting half an hour, and the diversions making up a relatively small portion, it's hard to summon the will to revisit them.

Each of *Switchback*'s four zones is themed after one of the *Dark Pictures* games. Even putting aside the unfavourable comparison to their characters, we don't recall any of them featuring so many anonymous zombies

Dredge

Developer Black Salt Games
Publisher Team17
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

There's never enough time in the day. All those fish to be caught and hauled back to shore before the price drops; a hole in your hull in need of patching; a shipwreck to be stripped of goodies to help pay for the hull repair. All standard concerns of the life sim, naturally, but *Dredge* provides extra incentives to get everything done before the sun dips below the horizon. At night, the madness starts to set in. At night, all the horrors come out.

Dredge draws a line between *Animal Crossing*'s pun-laced fishing minigame and Lovecraft's fondness for a seaside locale, and the two prove a surprisingly natural fit. There's the mayor who greets you as a new arrival in town, arranging a small loan to get you going – not a fiscally crafty raccoon, just an old man with a faraway look in his eyes and stories that trail off before they reach the tragedy at the end. Your core pastime has a sinister side too, easily keyed into with populations that can be depleted through overfishing and catches that gradually rot in your hold. Not to mention the occasional catch that has mutated, down in the depths.

In practice, these aberrant subspecies might exist as just an evocative snatch of writing (a squid with a row of teeth "flattened like human molars") and a slightly altered depiction in your inventory. Yet this is enough to send a small shiver of the uncanny down your spine the first time you pull one aboard – quickly followed by the proprietor's thrill of knowing that the locals, who consider this particular creature's flesh a delicacy, are willing to pay a premium.

These creatures are just the beginning of the strangeness that awaits beneath the surface, from rocks that hum beneath your touch to leviathans that disguise themselves as... well, that would be telling. But as the days stretch on, and your excursions push out farther from the safety of the starting town, it becomes increasingly apparent that catching one of God's mistakes is really no different from pulling an especially large trophy fish. Once your boat has been trashed a few times, the sight of a predatory fin creeping through the water rather loses its edge. In stories like this, the real scares live in the shadows, at the edge of view. And after a dozen hours puttering around *Dredge*'s archipelago, learning to put a precise dollar value on what should be unknowable terrors, the darkness no longer holds any real mystery for us. Perhaps it's a sly comment on the all-too-real horrors of industrial fishing, but we come away from *Dredge* knowing how to make everything fit into the day: simply never sleep, and sail through the night with a full hold of human-toothed cargo and nothing but numbness in your heart.

6

ROD STEWARD
In the grand tradition of fishing minigames – and, as we understand it, the real-life pastime – *Dredge*'s angling is pleasantly boring. Wait long enough and fish will simply reel themselves in, or you can hit a button in time with an active-reload-style gauge to speed things up. Miss, and you'll risk spending hours in the same spot, as night draws in. Once aboard, your catch must be sorted in a game of inventory *Tetris*, the rare mechanic to which the life sim and survival horror genres can lay equal claim.

Stay out too long after dark and a madness gauge will fill, triggering various ill effects – an inability to spot rocks in the fog until they smash against your hull and damage your ship is just the beginning

Paranormasight: The Seven Mysteries Of Honjo

Opening with a cheerful reminder of death's immutability, this visual novel's mercurial host asks what you'd do given the chance to resurrect the dead. Would you cede the power to another? Would you do it even if it meant sacrificing yourself or another? Or only if it came at no cost?

The latter option is moot in the case of this multi-stranded mystery: the curse stones that afford their bearers that ability are powered up by the dregs of human souls. Each can only be used once specific conditions have been fulfilled – though the one discovered by a 20-something office worker, whose story forms the game's prologue, demands only that someone walk away from him. He's soon given both cause and opportunity to do so, a prompt to press the left trigger affording you the terrible power to cut short the life of someone you've just met. Yet if it's a bad idea for anyone in your eyeline to turn their back, you soon discover it's equally unwise to do the same.

Indeed, there is a constant feeling here that *you're* the one being played. From the early moment when you're afforded a glimpse of something its enigmatic MC winkingly suggests you weren't supposed to see – one that naturally lends the following scenes an uneasy tension as you wait for the shoe to drop – it reminds you that you're not fully in control here. It has a habit of railroading you into things you'd rather not do, from those exhortations to kill (an effective way to demonstrate the stones' capacity to provoke murderous impulses) to the moment a character reacts in horror to something behind you, causing you to reluctantly thumb the right stick to swivel your head around only to reveal there's nothing there. And then you turn back...

That twisted sense of playfulness seeps into the narrative structure and puzzle design. Discoveries in each of the three main story threads – one following two detectives keen to retrieve the curse stones before more deaths occur, another centring on a bereaved mother, the third involving two schoolgirls investigating the suicide of a classmate – can affect events in the others. Sometimes it's a matter of moving characters to certain locations at a given time, but often it's more involved: you might suspend one chapter to find a phone number in another, with some clues known only to you popping into a character's head as if you're all somehow inhabiting a shared consciousness. It doesn't so much break the fourth wall as move effortlessly through it as a spectre might, leading to conundrums that rival the dearly departed Cing's finest work: one more act of resurrection in an ingeniously constructed ghost story.

8

Developer/publisher Square Enix
Format Android, iOS, PC, Switch (tested)
Release Out now

SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE

Paranormasight is classed as an ADV, a Japanese offshoot of the adventure genre that blends the text-based storytelling of visual novels with elements of exploration and puzzle solving, such as in the *Ace Attorney*, *Danganronpa* and *Zero Escape* series. In much the same way as 2021's *Dungeon Encounters* marked Hiroyuki Ito's directorial comeback, this is veteran writer-director Takanari Ishiyama's belated return to ADV, having previously been responsible for Genki's *Tantei Kibukawa Ryosuke Jikentan* detective series, which spawned ten mobile entries in the '00s.

Heavily processed panoramic photography of Sumida City lends authenticity to the environments. *The World Ends With You* character designer Gen Kobayashi is the artist behind the expressive 2D figures

The Wreck

Developer/publisher The Pixel Hunt
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

One of the unfortunate quirks of the human brain is its habit of recalling unpleasant memories – often at the moment you're least equipped to deal with revisiting them. Having been blindsided by the news that her mother has been placed on life support after suffering a brain injury, struggling screenwriter Junon is also forced to make the choice of what will happen to her. As if that wasn't bad enough, putting her key in the door of her car sends her mind careening back to a devastating crash, recreated here in harrowing fashion as the car skids wildly before flipping over, emptying a satchel of objects (hairbrush, lighter, phone, compact) in slow motion. These items become further windows into the past, as Junon relives incidents in her life, processing them anew as a form of self-therapy.

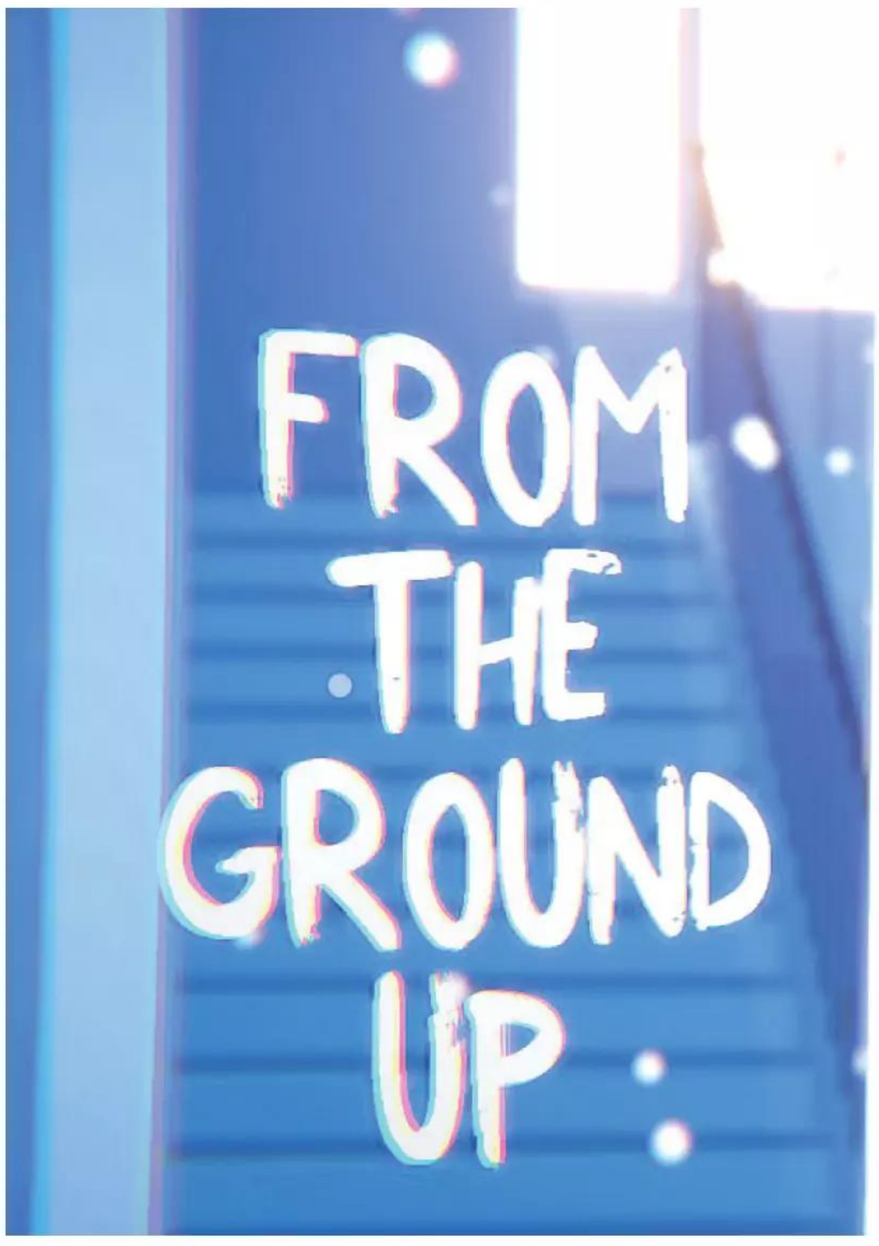
During a key scene of this intricately structured visual novel, you're asked to choose whether Junon chose to watch Manchester By The Sea or Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind as a coping mechanism – a moment that feels like a litmus test for whether you'll enjoy *The Wreck*. The choice of films is instructive: both deal with different kinds of loss in ways that involve a surprising degree of levity. This doesn't quite handle that tonal balancing act as well as either of those, the jokes sometimes undercutting the force of the emotions our protagonist is grappling with. But at other times it fits with the way we use humour as a coping mechanism. *The Wreck* trades in weighty themes, but such moments help ensure it's not a slog. There is real playfulness and imagination, too, in the ways the vignettes are mounted. Multiple memories combine in a rotating scene of an art exhibition, the paintings becoming *Mario 64*-esque portals in themselves. Another sequence fixes the camera on a bathroom ceiling, each click of the mouse cycling through days like a flipbook animation.

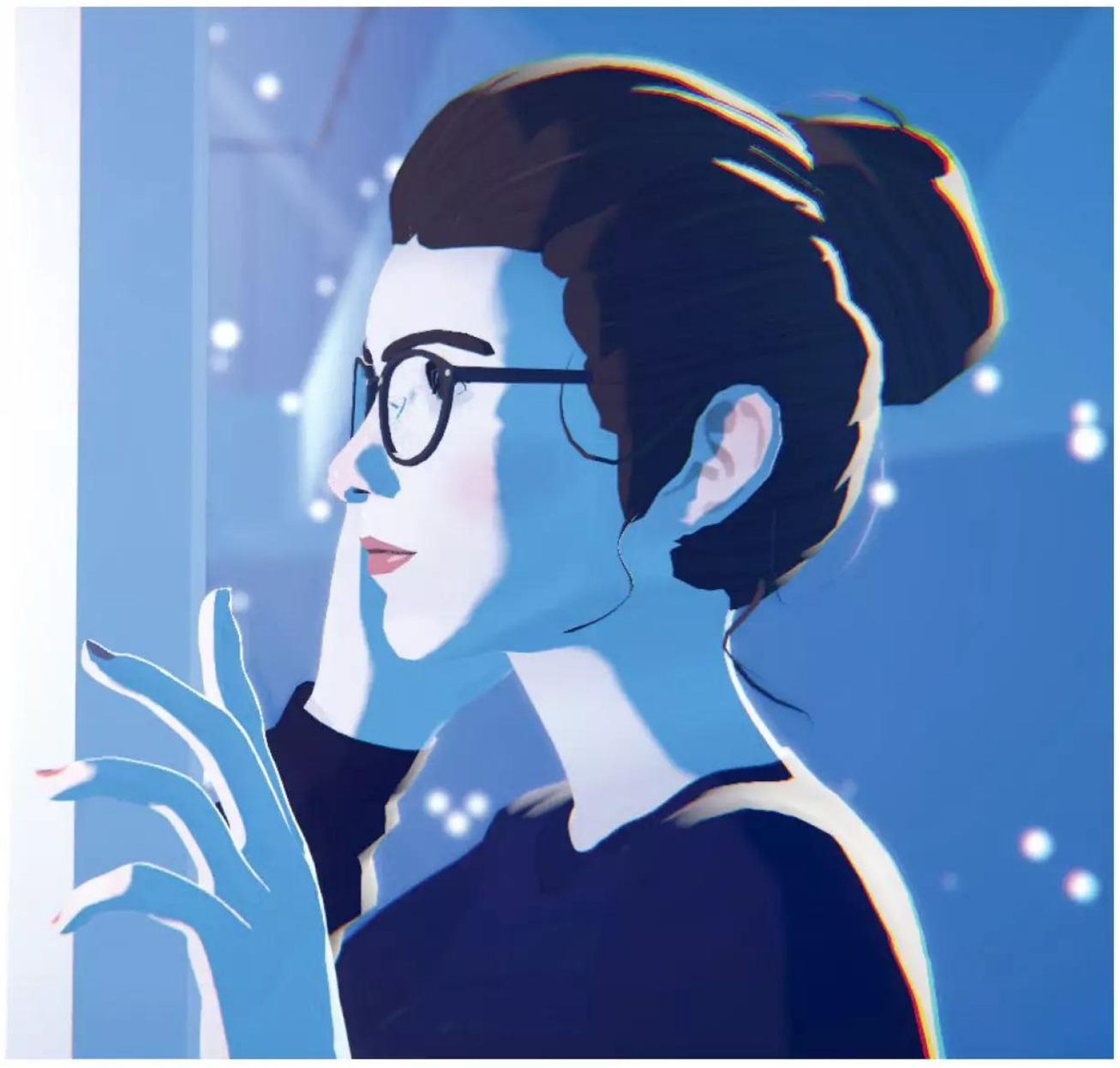
It's all bound up in Junon's own creative process, as these thoughts are tapped out as a screenplay on her computer. This isn't a particularly writable tale, though: from the start to the one big decision at the end, the only real control you have is winding back and forth through these scenes, picking out words embedded in the environment that reflect her feelings. It feels less like you're shaping the story, then, and more as though you're helping Junon push through her creative block, feeding her suggestions – not enough to really warrant a co-writing credit, but perhaps as a creative consultant. The resulting tangle of ideas and themes doesn't pack the tear-jerking wallop for which it's clearly striving, but in so openly confronting the complex emotions surrounding trauma and loss it captures moments of messy humanity that cut through the wreckage.

7

WRITE OFF
The impact of the crash is diminished over the many times it recurs, though that repetition captures some of the frustration Junon feels as she tries to recall the missing details that might help her leave it behind. Junon herself can be a little annoying on occasion, though that's by design: while her dialogue doesn't always ring true, her inner monologue paints a vivid portrait of a complex, flawed character you come to know and understand well over the game's four-hour runtime.

Winding back and forth through static scenes reminds us of *Hindsight* – this, too, has a habit of slightly overstating things, moreso during conversations during which everyone tends to verbalise precisely how they're feeling





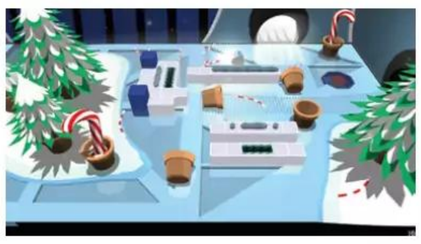
Can Of Wormholes

Developer/publisher Munted Finger
Format PC
Release Out now

During one particularly furious bout of head-scratching, we wonder if Australian designer Ben Taylor came up with the name of his ingenious puzzler first and then figured out how to create a game around it. How else could anyone have conceived the idea of piloting a sentient tin can, transformed into a spidery creature by a group of wriggling worms, that scuttles about and spits out wormholes which slot into circular apertures to unlock each level? That wormhole itself unrolls into the stage, inhabiting a dormant, worm-shaped object. This, too, gains legs, your objective being to guide this cursed creature into a hole to complete the level.

It is, predictably, more intuitive to play than to describe. You can eat pills to extend your body, à la *Snake*, allowing you to cross gaps wider than your original form as you wind your way through tight mazes or even around the edge of a stage. Sometimes you need to avoid the pills, else you'll wind up too big for the hole – and so you must find a way to push them, manoeuvring your tail around to nudge them along, or holding one in your mouth to push into another, perhaps to turn it into a stepping stone so you can cross a body of water too wide for your torso to span.

It's not much of a looker, granted. Should you remain unconvinced, the best thing we can say is that fans of games such as *Stephen's Sausage Roll* and *Pipe Push Paradise* will almost certainly find plenty to admire here



CRACKPOT
The game takes place aboard a rocket ship with multiple floors, and doors between areas that only open when you've solved a given number of puzzles – which means you can skip one or two if you're struggling, though the insights they provide might be useful later. The areas between stages become puzzles in and of themselves: at one point you lose your legs and roll around between a chain of plant pots (we can't quite believe that makes sense to us).

Soon, you're not the only worm that needs to be slid into an exit hole, and then you realise you can wrap your own mouth around them to drag or flip them into position – accompanied by a slurping sound effect that adds extra yuck factor to the game's already unsettling ambience. Perhaps it's simply that the conceit reminds us of Junji Ito's The Enigma Of Amigara Fault, but with annelids rather than people. Or perhaps that's down to the haunting, reverberating piano notes that sound whenever you eat a pill or complete a stage, or the dissonant chord accompanying a fall from the stage or a move that leaves the puzzle in an unsolvable position.

Luckily, you can undo as many moves as you like – a borderline essential feature for a game that seemingly has a bottomless number of fresh, confounding riffs on its single core idea. But patience brings regular epiphanies, and in the event that you're particularly stumped by a level, you can call up a pictorial clue that gives you a gentle push in the right direction without actually solving the puzzle for you. This might well be one of the finest hint systems (certainly in this type of game) that we've ever seen – and by the time you're slicing fellow worms back into pill form so you can gobble up and embiggen yourself once more, it's impossible not to marvel at the unhinged delights that Taylor has concocted here.

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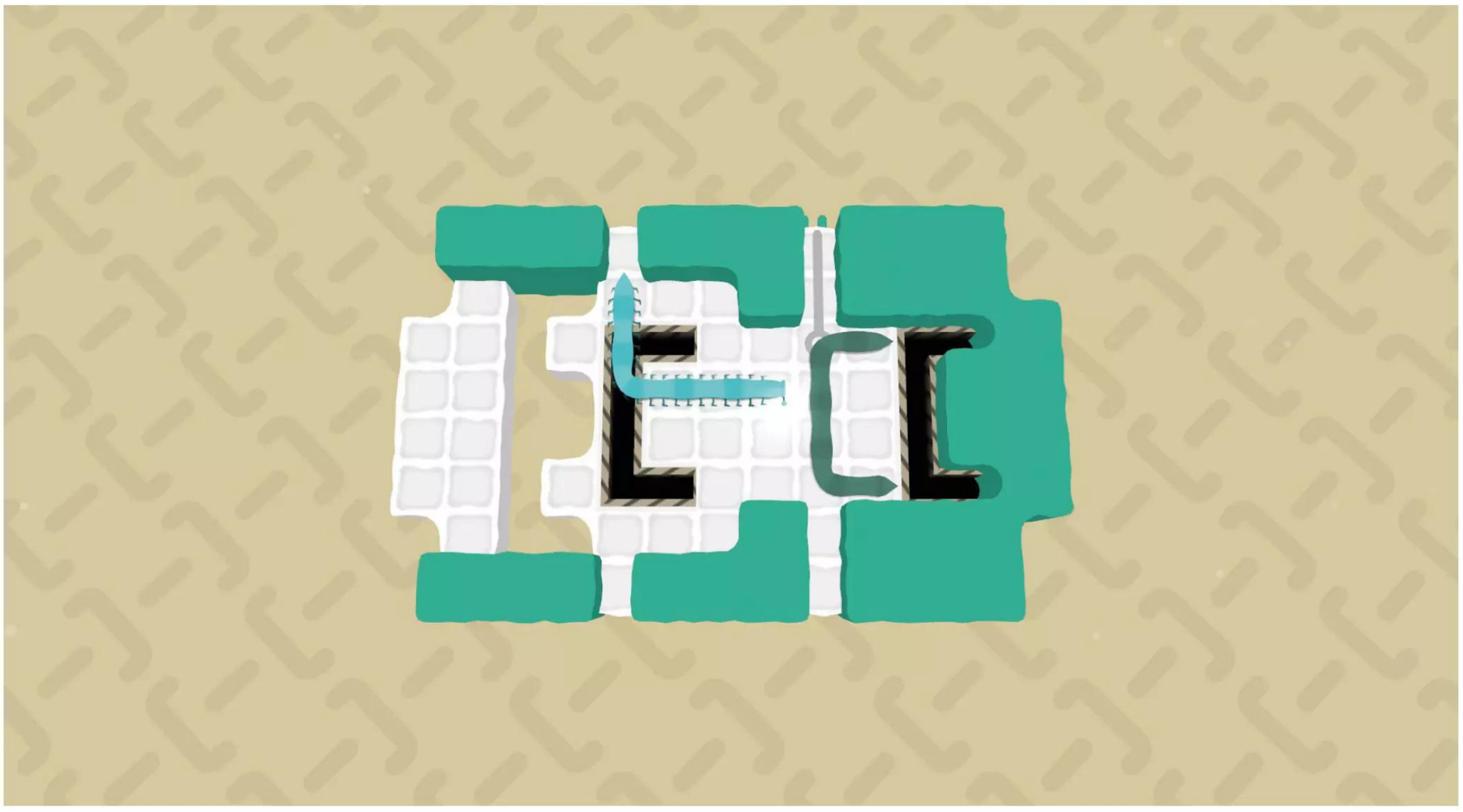

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Raiden III x Mikado Maniax

Developer Moss
Publisher NIS America
Format PC, PS4, PS5 (tested), Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now (Japan), June 9 (US/EU)

When *Raiden III* debuted in arcades in 2005, it felt like a statement of intent. This was a time when the bullet-hell sensibility dominated 2D shooter design: contemporary releases such as Cave's *Ketsui* and *Ibara* were elevating the form while upping ordnance count, and increasing numbers of arcade game makers were following suit. The team at *Raiden III* developer Moss, however, seemed unconcerned by such trends. The studio had spun out of series originator Seibu Kaihatsu, and was committed to maintaining how *Raiden* used to be. As it was in 2005, so it is today: *Raiden III* has been repackaged for modern platforms with Moss at the helm, and almost 20 years on it still stands out from the bullet-hell pack.

Taking players on a journey over Earth and into space, *Raiden III x Mikado Maniax* adheres to the arcade shooter template, meaning scoring-focused play built around a coin-op framework. Across seven stages the emphasis is on dodging firepower and outgunning opponents while dancing with a scoring system that provides seemingly endless possibilities for self-improvement.

Nothing wildly innovative, then. But *Raiden III*'s dazzling blend of speed and no-frills aggression makes for an exhilarating ride. *Mikado Maniax*'s play modes – standard, world ranking, boss rush and score attack – aren't too varied, but each excels in delivering thrilling runs marked by dramatic turns in fortune. The 'Flash Shot' system, meanwhile, encourages high-risk, high-reward play, adding to the nerve-jangling energy: the quicker you down rivals, the higher the score multiplier applied to each. Pushing score, then, comes from playing high up the screen, where the gains are abundant, but where things can go wrong extremely quickly. Atypically for the genre, *Raiden III* also works wonderfully as a twoplayer experience, even if you are pursuing higher-level play – or if a skill gap exists between paired pilots. And then there's 'double play' (see 'Double standards').

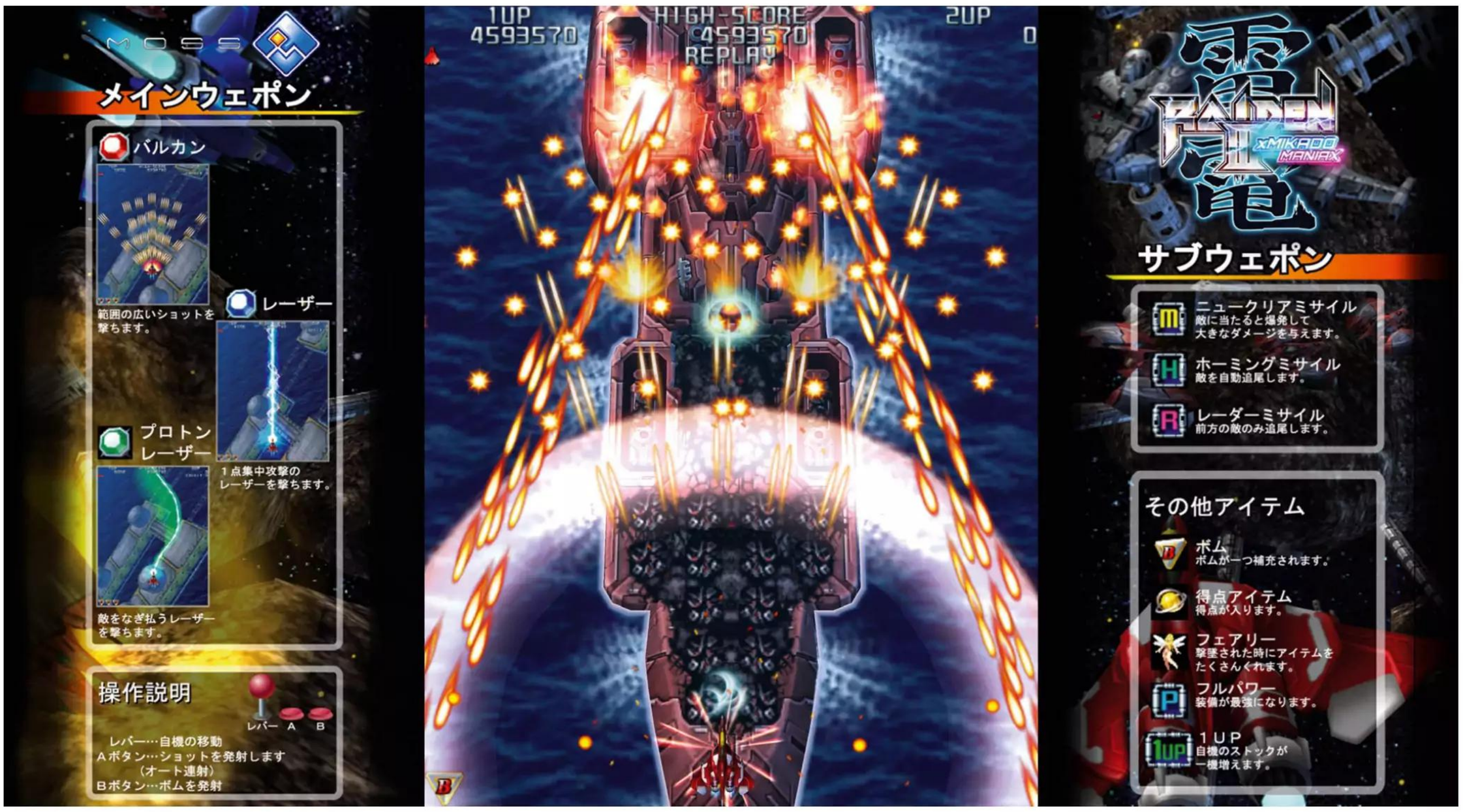
Raiden III x Mikado Maniax arrives with a scattering of modernising features on top of the online leaderboards, including the ability to switch in remixed music, as well as the likes of wallpaper art. The game itself has received a much-needed visual polish, meaning that the action is clear and readable even when the pace builds. Cutscenes, alas, don't seem to have benefitted from quite so much care, but they are few and far between, and of course incidental to how the game plays. Ultimately, while the *Mikado Maniax* reworking of *Raiden III* may not be abundant in terms of new features or modes, it does provide access to one of the most exciting, distinct and dramatic genre works – which may, with luck, earn it the attention in the west it has long deserved.

8

DOUBLE STANDARDS

Raiden III has always excelled as a place for 'double play', meaning a single player controlling both ships simultaneously for a combined score. At points *Raiden III* feels built first and foremost for double play, particularly in terms of enemy wave placement. True, it's absurdly hard, but it's something anyone with an affection for the genre should try at least once. Even at the lowest difficulty, *Raiden III x Mikado Maniax*'s provision is a fine way to sample one of arcade gaming's most exhilarating pursuits.

Aggressive, energetic and unrelentingly pacy, *Raiden III x Mikado Maniax* offers something distinct from its modern bullet-hell peers by leaning into the series' early-1990s arcade roots, during Seibu Kaihatsu's heyday



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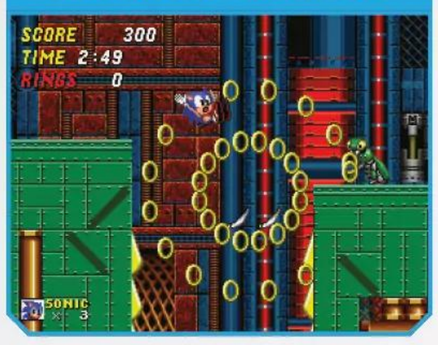				

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TIME EXTEND

Final Fantasy XV

A royal camping trip that went awry – but found partial redemption in the friends made along the way

By Jon Bailes

Developer/publisher Square Enix **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2016

Cindy the mechanic looks like a Victoria's Secret model and speaks like an old-timer of the Gold Rush era. As the first NPC you meet out in the world of *Final Fantasy XV*, she sets the tone for a game of mismatches. Indeed, it's a surprise to encounter a 'Cindy' in a world where the main cast have names such as Noctis Lucis Caelum, Gladiolus Amicitia, and Lunafreya Nox Fleuret. Sure, Noctis is a prince and Lunafreya a princess and oracle, but it's not as though the game ever explores this disparity in syllables as a marker of status. Rather, by the time you meet another NPC, Dave, a little later, it's more as though the support character designers ran out of enthusiasm once they'd finished rounding off Cindy's cleavage. Not that 'Dave' isn't a fine name, naturally, but it's hard to shake the sense that nobody gave much thought to him, or his moniker.

Forgettable as Dave might be, though, like Cindy he symbolises so much about *Final Fantasy XV*. As much as protagonist Noctis and his trio of chums – Gladiolus, Ignis and Prompto – represent everything in the game that's detailed and polished, Dave stands for all the bits that are underdesigned, if not plain unfinished. The presence of Dave exemplifies an experience that's often good and bad simultaneously, and not in a way that evens out to average. Dave embodies the truth that *Final Fantasy XV* will forever exist in a state of internal contradiction.

To an extent, this was inevitable, given the game's difficult gestation. Originally conceived as *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* some ten years before it saw the light of day, during development it expanded, mutated, became a mainline series entry, outgrew PS3, changed engine, and had a change of director. Trailers for *Versus XIII* before the rebrand reveal many of the components that appeared in *XV*: Noctis and his entourage, a mix of 'real-world' architecture and techno-fantasy, the invasion of Noctis' kingdom and his cross-country road trip to unite with his betrothed, Lunafreya. But the project would be trimmed down – including the axing of an opening act which depicted this precipitating invasion – in an effort to prevent an even later birth.

While careful, surgical cuts can certainly lead to a tighter final product, in this case the operation to save *Final Fantasy XV* left large, visible scars. Your journey across the land of Lucis and beyond ping-pongs from varnished shine to placeholder coarseness, occasionally even within the same scene. The quality is mainly front-loaded into an open-world adventure which culminates in the spectacular water city of Altissia, where Lunafreya awaits. The first half of the game makes hay with the act of cruising quiet highways in the Bentley-like Regalia, gasping at sights – a huge arching rock bridge that brushes across the horizon, for example – then hopping from the car to explore on foot.

Yet even here this 'fantasy based on reality' doesn't fit together. The opening area, with its strained rural southern US overtones, presents a caricature of a culture, spaces filled with classic booth diners and twanging country tunes, with no sense that they gel with a wider geography or technology. The same might be said of Lestallum, the country's largest town, where an idyllic tropical tourist spot chokes under a smoke-spewing power plant. Lucis is full of holiday-snap views, but they don't add up to a complete picture.

The charm of the principal cast thus has to act as a binding agent. At first it seems foolhardy that Square Enix would throw all its eggs in one basket, introducing its full playable cast from the start as a static party, with no new faces to mix things up down the line. It's a very one-dimensional group, too, with its quartet of young white men certainly not offering something for everyone, other than a range of broad personality archetypes: mopey hero, goofy sidekick, beefy guardian, nerdy strategist.

But serving up a gang of already firm (and likeable) friends turns out to be *Final Fantasy XV*'s smartest narrative stroke, tossing aside the stale conceit of disparate strangers combing for a common cause to centre on existing bonds. The tone is set in an opening full of boyish excitement, wrapped in a cover version of Ben E King's Stand By Me that can't help but remind you of the film of the same name. While ▶

The *Final Fantasy* staple of summoning an Astral god in battle feels properly epic in *XV*, with beings such as Titan towering over the battlefield

Noctis and co may be older than the kids in Rob Reiner's coming-of-age drama, they're similarly naïve and awestruck by the world.

With the initial aim of travelling to Noctis' wedding, what follows is a long stag weekend of camping, hunting, fishing and chocobo riding. Sure, there are things you must do in order to move the plot forward: battling through tombs to retrieve magic weapons, and infiltrating Niflheim Empire strongholds. But it's the little moments – such as angling at the edge of a lake patrolled by dinosaurs – that hold firm in the memory. And no game has made setting up camp for the night such a vital experience. Gladiolus hammers the tent pegs in. Ignis gets dinner ready. Prompto shares his latest photos. Given the advancing threat of the Empire, it's absurd that there's room for this, but it captures the essence of a bunch of kids enjoying a last carefree fling as they're propelled towards grave responsibility.

Then again, this downtime only gets so much attention because the major events that would normally punctuate a grand RPG have been so conspicuously amputated. For instance, the gang only learn of the fall of their city, Insomnia, and the assassination of the king, when they read the morning papers. Rather than a postmodern subversion of RPG storytelling, though, this feels like a cost-cutting exercise. A cutscene tinged with shock and sadness segues into a detour mission to return to the city to verify what's happened, then it's back to the holiday. Subsequent chapters then interrupt your fun with the appearances of politicians and army commanders that you don't know from Dave.

Yes, you could watch Kingsglaive, the CGI movie released ahead of the game that details the background to the invasion and gives more screen time to these players. Yet that too feels like a desperate measure to catch the spillover from the main game. Kingsglaive doesn't so much add texture and context to the story (which the animated series Brotherhood, another *XV* multimedia spin-off, does more successfully) as it does fill in gaping holes. It's especially incongruous since every time you load up the game, a message appears claiming this is 'A *Final Fantasy* for fans and first-timers'. Because nothing says 'for first-timers' more than having to track down separate films and TV shows to complete the plot.

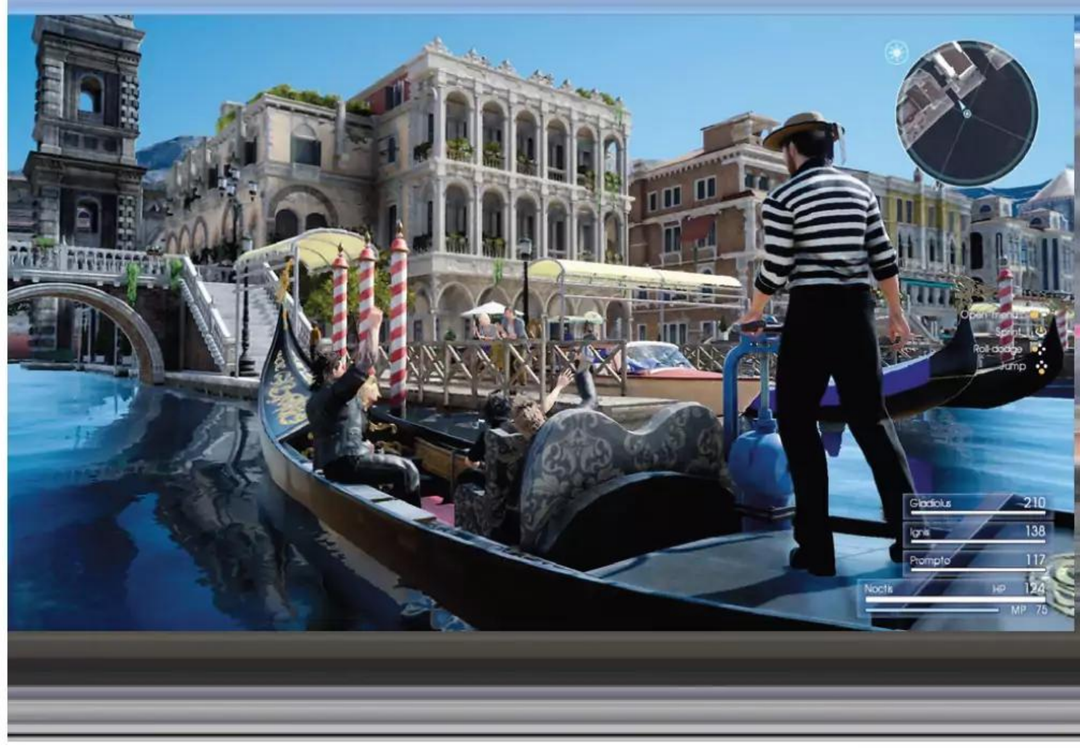
THE MAJOR EVENTS THAT WOULD NORMALLY PUNCTUATE A GRAND RPG HAVE BEEN CONSPICUOUSLY AMPUTATED

The biggest hole is still to come, though, after you reach Altissia in chapter nine (of 15) and Noctis' love story with Lunafreya is brutally pruned before it's had a chance to bloom. From here, the great adventure turns into a three-chapter train ride – from open world to the very definition of linearity. You do make a few stops along the way, to wade around a swamp and scuffle with Niflheim soldiers and daemons. But as vast expanses of open country roll past the carriage windows, it's clear that you're being pushed through a series of stapled-together snippets from an

The presentation of food is a labour of love, expressing shared experiences, tainted only by jarring product placement

WARP FACTOR

Final Fantasy XV's combat system is as indicative of the game's contradictions as anything else. Supposedly combining action-game immediacy with RPG tactics, in reality it only fulfils one side of the brief. Noctis' 'warp strike', which lets you propel him away from battle then back in again at speed, is inspired, while segues from parries to link attacks with allies add to the sense of a group dynamic. Yet the scant influence you have over your AI companions is a stride backwards from *Final Fantasy XII*, especially since your crew refuse to take basic care of themselves. And even now (post-DLC) that you can switch characters, it's a fudge compared to the party system built into *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. Despite the impressive pace and spectacle, it's a pale imitation of Square Enix's best.



Altissia is the game's one truly spectacular city, perched improbably atop a waterfall and inspired architecturally by Venice

original vision that would surely have had you out there exploring at your leisure.

By this point in the tale, the world is succumbing to darkness, and it seems as though the game is collapsing in on itself. Not only is it dull, it's a betrayal of what has gone before – the reward of any open-world adventure is surely an opening up, rather than a contraction, as you progress. Indeed, there's a sense of sheepish recognition as a contrived mechanism involving Lunafreya's dog lets you return to Lucis before the devastation. But the holiday spirit has gone, and no amount of nostalgia can claw back what's been abandoned. There's some irony as you sit on the train contemplating how the game has gone off the rails.

Still, this sequence of chapters has been redeemed somewhat after the fact, thanks to the DLC episodes. Again, it's the entourage that comes to the rescue, plastering over the cracks with solo excursions that branch off from Noctis' story. Jarring gaps in the original version – not least the event of Ignis going blind in Altissia, which profoundly affects the group dynamic – are now filled with content. In fact, the episodes show us what we've been missing: focus on key events and backstory for our crew, and welcome variety during more linear sequences. Well, not so much in Gladiolus' episode, which is largely an extended dungeon romp, but both Prompto and Ignis are given plenty to do and generous slices of plot to chew through. In particular, Prompto's snow-bike chases and thirdperson shooter combat show how the game may have got away with narrowing down if it had made more of each character's abilities.

What these episodes and other additions in 2018's *Royal Edition* can't do, however, is complete the game. Nor can they rescue what is ultimately a dreary plot arc about royal bloodlines and prophecies. When it comes to its world-ending threat, you may even conclude that *Final Fantasy XV* could have been trimmed down further. Perhaps the tale would have worked better if Noctis and friends really did simply go on a stag holiday, maybe stirring up resentment among the country folk, and getting caught up in some local conspiracy. Perhaps Dave could have been the villain of the piece. Then again, perhaps we should cherish what we did get, warts and all. How often nowadays does a game of this stature feel so improvised, so unusual, and so impossible to repeat? ■

The late reveal of Ardyn as the game's true antagonist is something of a damp squib, but he's also been reprieved with a dedicated DLC episode

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Citizen Sleeper

Developer Jump Over The Age **Publisher** Fellow Traveller **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** 2022

You have good days and bad days. In advance, it's hard to know which is going to be which. While the likelihood of a bad day can be mitigated – by eating well, by taking the right medicine – even that isn't a guarantee. These help to set the ceiling higher, but the floor is still the floor. Some mornings you're faced with a bad roll of the dice, and have to accept that not much is going to get achieved today. Which is a problem, when you rely on work to pay for that food and medicine. Try to push on, though, and failure can push you deeper into a spiral, draining the energy you have left and ensuring tomorrow will be harder still.

So, yes: *Citizen Sleeper* might be set in the Helion system, but its greatest strength has always been knowing how to hit considerably closer to home. That's just as true of its trilogy of DLC episodes, which introduce to Erlin's Eye (the space station you've learned to call home) a flotilla of refugees from the ruined moons of a distant planet, kept at arm's length for processing while the Eye's authorities decide their fate. As we begin the final chapter, *Purge*, the UK government is boasting about its latest cruelties towards immigrants. It's not hard to imagine where Gareth Damian Martin – the game's solo designer and writer, and a fellow Brit – gets their crazy ideas from.

But it would do this story a disservice to suggest it's simply ripped from the headlines. Things are more nuanced than that, rooted in the authentic, messy humanity that *Citizen Sleeper* has always done so well. These refugees aren't a huddled mass. They come from three distinct cultures, all rubbing up against one another, and the representatives that you meet from each are sharply drawn individuals, frequently selfish, rude, ungrateful. Of course, they needn't play the role of 'the good immigrant' to deserve your help, even if you have to earn their trust before they'll take it. There might be a reward for doing so – after spending a good roll on a repair crew shift, they take a liking to you and share a homebrewed spirit that lends much-needed inner warmth – but once more, there's no guarantee.

The plot of these episodes is the closest *Citizen Sleeper* comes to a classic hero narrative: world-threatening stakes, with you in the saviour role, and a big decision to round it all off. It's the logical conclusion of the game's overall narrative arc, where you go from finding your feet to being in a position where you can do the same for others. Finding a way to not only survive but contribute, even on your bad days, not knowing if you'll get anything back – now that's something to aspire to. ■

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