EDGE ®

STRAY

WHY ANNAPURNA'S
URBAN ADVENTURE IS
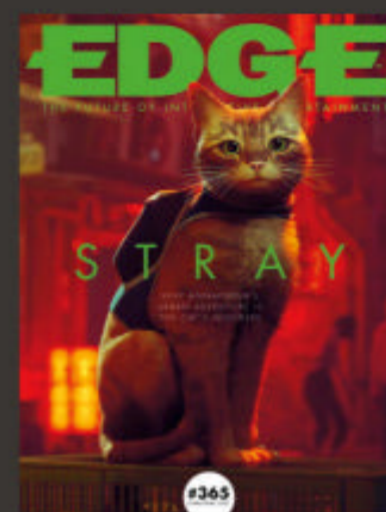THE CAT'S WHISKERS

#365

CHRISTMAS 2021

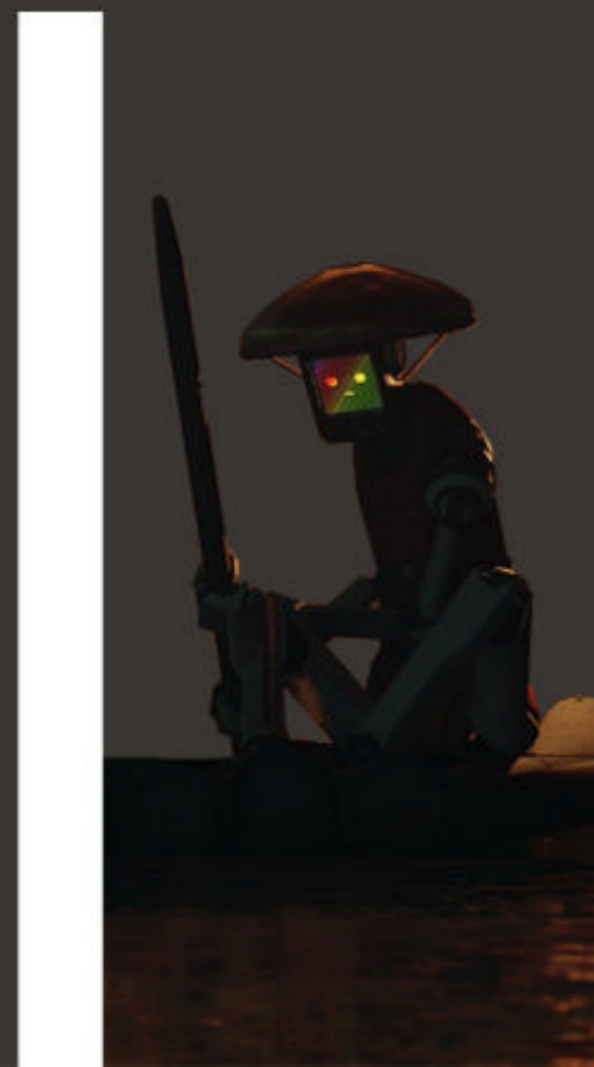# Getting bigger and sleeker and wider and brighter

Do you ever find yourself trying to remember what life was like before Apple's iPhone arrived? Tough, isn't it? How on earth did we ever waste so much of our time when we didn't have high-powered touchscreen computing devices constantly at our fingertips? It's even more difficult to visualise the time before videogames, because their invention feels like a lifetime away. It was 50 years ago this month that Nutting Associates' *Computer Space* became the first videogame to be played in exchange for money, thus marking the birth of a modern industry. The futuristic-looking arcade machine wasn't entirely original, having taken inspiration from an existing computer game, but crucially it was first to market, giving the team behind it the opportunity to build Atari, a company that grew at lightning pace, broke the rules and dominated its competitors.

In some respects, the shape of the fledgling Atari in the early '70s brings to mind modern-era Apple, but with a crucial difference: Atari's productions were the work of a few lone engineers, versus the hundreds that contributed to the original iPhone design in 2007. *Computer Space* was scrabbled together in a makeshift lab through cigarette smoke and solder fumes, its creators entirely unaware of what would follow down the track half a century later. Sadly, brilliant engineer Ted Dabney isn't alive to see how far we've come since, but fellow Atari co-founder Nolan Bushnell pays tribute to his work in this issue's Collected Works (p68), which harks back to where everything began (and when two emerging engineering talents named Jobs and Wozniak were keen Atari game-makers).

Certain aspects of today's interactive entertainment landscape might not earn Dabney's approval, but his inventor's mindset would ensure he'd appreciate the diversity of videogames on offer, especially those crafted by independent studios, with independent values. A game such as *Stray*, for example, featuring a wide-eyed cat navigating an exquisitely rendered world populated by robotic humanoids. Our cover story begins on p52.

Exclusive subscriber edition

EDGE

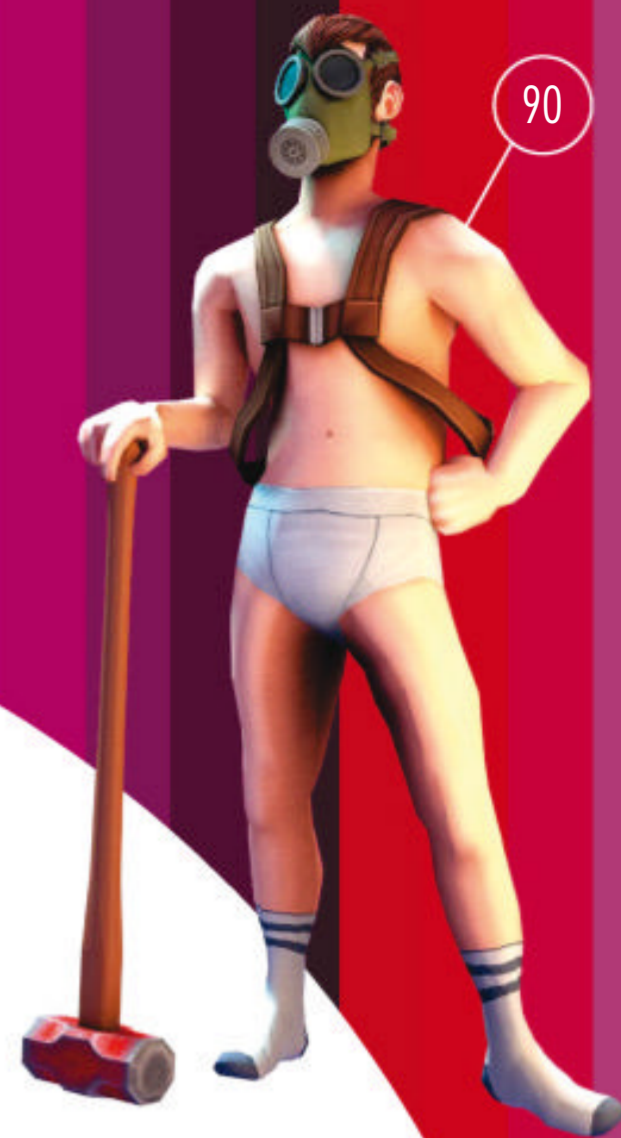# games

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Chain reaction

As **NFT tech attracts big names** – and big bans – does it have a future in videogames?

For a good while, 'NFT' has been just another entry in a long list of three-letter initialisms that was easy to ignore. Like so many technological fads before it, the thinking went, it would surely simply fizzle out. But with millions of dollars of investment in the space, an explosion of players in blockchain-powered games, and now the high-profile involvement of Will Wright, it's clear that it's not going away. And that's despite Valve going so far as to amend Steam's publishing rules to outright ban any applications that trade in cryptocurrencies or NFTs. The question today is becoming inevitable: what legitimacy, if any, do these technologies have within videogames?

For the uninitiated, NFT stands for non-fungible token – meaning one that is unique and not interchangeable with a similar equivalent, which has its ownership and transaction history recorded on the blockchain's ledger. Most commonly, it's associated with a digital object, with the NFT used to convey ownership of something that is, ultimately, intangible. But importantly, the two things are separate entities. Buying an NFT for a piece of digital art, for example, doesn't grant you any rights to that work's intellectual property, nor naturally does it stop any passers-by from saving a copy of the art on their own hard drives. What you're buying, ultimately, is not the thing itself but a certificate of ownership. Bragging rights. A receipt.

This somewhat shaky concept of digital ownership and artificial scarcity is one of the many reasons NFTs are

Kaiser Hwang, vice president, Forte

viewed with scepticism. Another is the number of scams in which the technology has already been involved. Take, for example, *Evolved Apes*, a project that offered investors the chance to purchase one of 10,000 unique ape characters, promising that they'd be able to play as that character in an eventual fighting game, with cryptocurrency rewards for the victor. Within a week, one of the developers (known only, in a fine piece of foreshadowing, as 'Evil Ape') disappeared with the proceeds. That this is far from the only such rug-pull shouldn't come as a big surprise. This is a gold rush, with a typical gold rush audience.

Of greater concern, though, has been the environmental impact associated with mining – that is, using processors to solve mathematical problems that help validate transactions on the blockchain, with miners potentially reaping nuggets of cryptocurrency as rewards. (That crypto mining has been a major contributing factor to the graphics card shortages of recent years is a particularly tedious side effect.)

This isn't an entirely necessary part of blockchain technology (see 'Raised stakes', p10), and there is evidence of a move away from the proof-of-work model that incentivises mining. If this shift doesn't happen, blockchain will take its place alongside the coal mine in terms of its environmental prospects. Assume that all of the very real problems that exist in

the present are solved, however, and that the gold rush segues into something more sustainable – no small leaps of faith – the next question is: what could blockchain technology even offer to videogames?

Most of the implementations we've seen so far follow a pattern, essentially taking the way NFTs have been deployed in the art world and tying that to the concept of microtransactions. As an example, *Blankos Block Party* is a free-to-play multiplayer game presenting itself as the halfway point between *Rec Room* and *Fall Guys*, combined with the Funko Pop toy line. The Blankos of the title are squat collectibles with oversized heads – each of which, naturally, is tied to an NFT.

"When you own a Blanko, you own them – not even the creators can take them away from you," the game's official blurb explains. This gets to the heart of what *Blankos Block Party* – and similar applications of NFTs – is promising to players. That in-game accessory or character skin or horse armour you bought with real-world money? Now you own it, can sell it on to other players, and perhaps even turn a profit in the process. You can see the same concept at work in *Doctor Who: Worlds Apart*, a digital trading card game using NFTs as an attempt to replicate the speculation market of its real-world equivalents.

It's not enormously different from the grey markets that already exist around ▶

> That character skin you bought with real-world money? Now you own it, and can sell it on to other players

Blankos Block Party characters can be bought boxed or unboxed. At the time of writing, these examples cost £25–£55 each

BLANKOS
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games, with consumers selling the keys to their *Fortnite* accounts on eBay to grant access to a single skin, while six-figure sums are being paid for *CS:GO*'s garish virtual AK-47s. The benefit of the NFT approach over grey markets is less hassle for players; for developers, it's the chance to take a cut of sales that would otherwise be happening outside of the game's official ecosystem. In turn, the fact that we're already accustomed to the concept of digital ownership in games has the benefit for blockchain enthusiasts of erasing that first concern – and in-game assets already have a level of built-in protection that makes them more resistant to right-click heists.

Adjacent to all this is the growing world of 'play-to-earn' games such as *CryptoKitties* and *Axie Infinity*. Describing itself as a "digital pet universe", *Axie* gives the impression of *Pokémon*, *Tamagotchi* and *Neopets* being put in a blender, and then having their associated production values extracted. The game itself – composed mainly of battling, farming and breeding – feels like a joyless grind, but that hasn't prevented its developer, Vietnam-based Sky Mavis, recently raising funding to the tune of $152m.

For its adherents, playing *Axie* is just a means to an end: earning the game's two Ethereum-based cryptocurrencies, Axie Infinity Shards and Smooth Love Potions, which can then be spent on in-game objects, in turn yielding more resources, or cashed out for real money. (At the time of writing, a single Sweet Love Potion is worth approximately $0.07.) Potential players are romanced with talk of earning a living from the game, and it's true that in the Philippines, which accounts for by far the largest share of *Axie*'s current userbase, some consumers are earning in the region of $10 per day, an amount that stretches considerably further in the region than it would in the west.

It's worth noting that this is no free lunch. It can cost over $1,000 to buy into *Axie Infinity* in the first place, which has led to a culture of 'guilds', involving wealthy investors outsourcing the actual playing to those who can't afford the upfront cost, volunteering to grow the value of the owner's portfolio in exchange for a share of the proceeds.

On current evidence, then, tangible benefits of NFTs in videogames seem thin on the ground. At best, they're the next evolution in microtransactions, a replacement for the lootbox economy should governments finally decide to crack down on that particular form of gambling. At worst, they're a disturbingly effective way of scamming people out of money, or of imprinting grim late-capitalist reality onto videogames more indelibly than ever before.

However, the negatives might not be a result of the technology itself so much as the people involved. "There's a lot of blockchain enthusiasts who see its economic potential in games, and many of them have been leaning specifically into those ideas in their games," says **Kaiser Hwang**, vice president at blockchain gaming tech firm Forte. Because they're approaching the space from a purely tech angle, it's argued, there's not much interest in how it could be applied to open up videogames' design space. (Not everyone has this excuse: while *Blankos Block Party* studio Mythical Games was founded by videogame veterans, they have been fairly open about the fact that they're less interested in the game itself than building an NFT marketplace.)

But if you're looking for game design talent to prove a space's worth, you can't do much better than Will Wright, whose new studio, Gallium – formed along with *Carmen Sandiego* creator Lauren Elliott – is working with Forte on its first game, *Proxi*. Surely, if anyone can find a worthwhile application here, isn't it a man who has proved himself one of videogames' most inventive designers?

Proxi is a lot to take in, even before we get to the NFT aspect. In brief, it promises to let players create an AI 'proxi' of their personality that behaves like them, with which they can then interact – or send out into the virtual world to interact with other players' proxies. These personality profiles are based on recreations of memories from the player's life, represented in-game as snowglobe dioramas, built in much the same way as a house in *The Sims*. Individual items can be designed by hand, pulled from the game's own catalogue, or bought from other players.

The latter element is where Forte's technology comes in. Each user-created object is tied to an NFT, and creators are able to choose whether to sell them publicly, in what quantities, and at what price. It recalls the best argument for NFTs in the art world: that they represent an opportunity for starving artists to get paid (in theory, at least). As Wright himself said in a recent discussion: "How do we give the community credit for the value that they assign to our game?"

Although Gallium isn't doing this out of the kindness of its heart – it will, of course, take a cut of each purchase – it feels like a more noble aim than what we've seen in most of the games currently using blockchain technology.

But it's also somewhat tertiary to the design of the game itself, and something that could surely be achieved through a more traditional marketplace structure.

Which might leave you wondering whether blockchain has anything to offer the game experience, except for warping it into something that resembles a job. On this front, Hwang is insistent that what we've seen so far is just a handful of examples from "a potentially infinite" number of applications for blockchain. "One way to use it *is* as a monetisation method for developers, as well as players," he says, "but there's also creative ways to use it." One example he gives is taking blockchain's inherent record of a token's history and applying it to a beloved weapon in an MMO. Exactly what that would look like, we're not yet sure – and it does, unfortunately, remind us of the story about Ethereum's creation stemming

> It feels like a joyless grind, but that hasn't prevented its developer recently raising funding to the tune of $152m

from a tantrum that erupted when founder Vitalik Buterin's favourite *World Of Warcraft* spell was nerfed.

However, this is at least a reasonably concrete example of how blockchain might engage with actual game design, rather than with the economies that exist around them. And for Forte, Hwang is keen to clarify, this stuff is not hypothetical: it's working with multiple other developers, including Hi-Rez Studios and *The Incredible Machine*'s Jeff Tunnell, and is currently testing on a private network with over eight million monthly active users.

However, we're not yet privy to what those games look like. Perhaps as they begin to emerge into the light, we'll be able to take a clearer measure of blockchain's potential. For now, what we're left with is a list of questions that's only getting longer. Will there ever be a use of blockchain that's enough to win over its critics? Could most of its use cases be achieved through more traditional means? Most important of all: will it actually address those problems we outlined up front? Perhaps it *will* ultimately fizzle out, as originally expected, or be extinguished. But otherwise, whether it represents a thought-provoking new avenue for game development or a threat to the wellbeing of the planet, we cannot ignore it. ◼
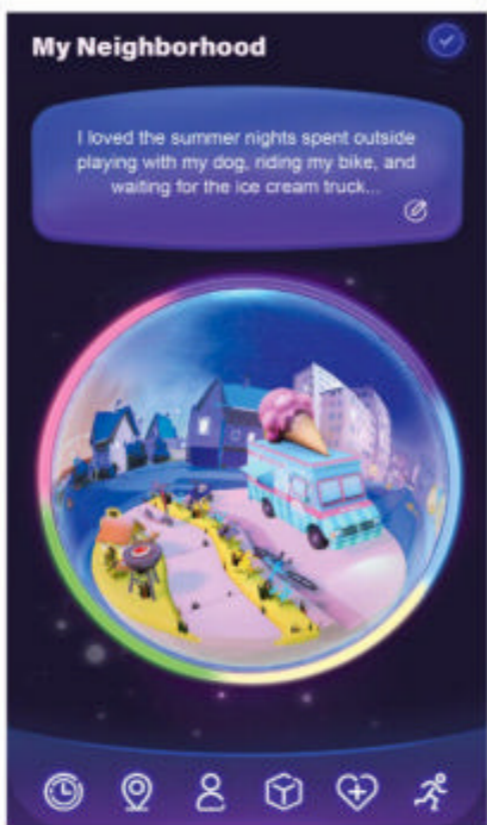
ABOVE *Evolved Apes* characters are still available, but at the time of going to press the average price has dipped to 0.003 Ether (just under £10), from a peak of around £600. LEFT An early prototype of what a memory may look like in Will Wright's NFT-powered *Proxi*

RESALE VALUE
What NFTs could mean for second-hand games

Looking outside of the actual in-game experience, another potential use case for NFTs could be creating a resale market for digital editions. At a time when digital-only consoles are becoming increasingly common, it is at least an interesting notion. And at the forefront of this, unexpectedly, is Intellivision Amico. Though the console itself is still to be released, 'boxed editions' of its games have recently gone on sale for $/€80 per set of four. The boxes don't actually contain any physical media but do come complete with an NFT, allowing buyers to transfer ownership of each downloadable game through the blockchain.

Rebel alliance

Inside **Kepler Interactive**, the studio-owned group putting new emphasis on collaboration

Kepler Interactive is making some big promises. Coming from the people who brought us the Kowloon Nights fund, and backed to the tune of $120m by Chinese tech firm NetEase, it's claiming to have constructed a new model for independent game development: a major publisher co-owned and run by (currently) seven developers – A44, Alpha Channel, Awaceb, Ebb Software, Shapefarm, Sloclap and Timberline Studio. At a time when self-publishing is on the rise, alongside a surge in indie developer-publishers, it feels that the model's benefits need some unpicking. It turns out that we needn't have looked any further than Kepler's reveal trailer.

Not so much its contents – though it's a stylish intro to its studios' games – but rather how it was made. "It was really like a symphony of working together," Kepler CEO **Alexis Garavaryan** says. The montage was put together by a video specialist at Paris's Sloclap, edited to music composed by Thomas Lilja of Tokyo's Shapefarm. "It really felt like this community coming together to put this thing out," Garavaryan says. "We just were like, 'Wow, this is really the kind of thing we can do if we combine forces and work together'."

This is the promise of the Kepler model: a collective of studios that retain their creative freedom while sharing the resources of a larger publishing group. That means financing and a little extra weight at the bargaining table, Garavaryan says, as well as in-house HR, marketing and QA teams – and, perhaps most important of all, developer knowledge. The kind of things Sloclap

CEO **Pierre de Margerie** calls "really boring stuff", such as build deployment when you're working remotely, or localisation practices. "We've built this tool for Unreal, we can package it and send it to you guys, and it's going to spare you a couple of months' work," he says. "These are very concrete things that we're seeing right now."

But none of this is what excites De Margerie most. "You've got a team that's slightly separate, that can take a step back more easily, and point out things that you can't necessarily see any more." He compares it to Pixar's Braintrust initiative. "You can show a build, and everybody's got candid, honest, transparent feedback on what they think works and doesn't work."

This approach, like Kepler itself, grew out of Garavaryan's prior venture. "It became really apparent, running Kowloon, that our devs talk to each other – a lot. We have a Discord server, and everyone exchanges tech support, market data, memes, pets, everything." This isn't something they're obliged to do – "they actually have no particular relationship other than being funded by the same entity" – but the appetite is clear.

And speaking of studios that don't necessarily have much in common: Kepler's founding members span New Zealand, Serbia, Canada and beyond. The games they're making are similarly diverse: *Sifu*'s interactive martial-arts movie, *Tchia*'s South Pacific blend of *GTA* and *Wind Waker*, *Scorn*'s Giger-esque horror shooter. Impressive, sure, but won't this make it a little hard to work together?

"The seven studios are all using Unreal. It's not an accident. We're trying to make life a little bit easier"

"I think it's pretty healthy," De Margerie says. "We don't work on the same types of genres, but it doesn't mean that as players and game makers we're not interested by genres other than the ones we make ourselves." So sharing feedback shouldn't be a problem – what about tools? "Even in wildly different genres, you see the same problems over and over again, whether it's tech, development, VFX, sound, production – we are all faced with the same issues." There is one practical connection, though, Garavaryan adds: "The initial group of seven studios are all using Unreal. It's not an accident. We're trying to make life a little bit easier on ourselves."

However, we're told that this won't be a prerequisite of joining Kepler. "I think, down the line, you'll start seeing studios who are primarily using Unity, for example, joining the group," Garavaryan says. "At some point, you might see people who are more expert at mobile titles." He's making no secret, then, of the wish to expand Kepler's membership. "We have some studios who have knocked on our door after the announcement and said, 'Hey, this model looks interesting – I'd love to join'."

That decision, though, lies with the seven founding members, which have equal say in every meaningful decision affecting the group. "It's down to the studios to say: 'We think this team is great, we love the kind of games they make, we think they fit really well what we want to build for this group, so we should bring them in'. And then the financial process kicks in. But every decision is primarily driven by content, by the quality of the team, by whether or not they're a good fit for what we're trying to make here." And if they're any good at putting together a trailer? Well, it probably couldn't hurt. ■

De Margerie says that Sloclap is taking the long view with Kepler: "It's still the very beginning"

According to De Margerie, "The rest of the [Sloclap] team is super focused on finalising and polishing *Sifu*"
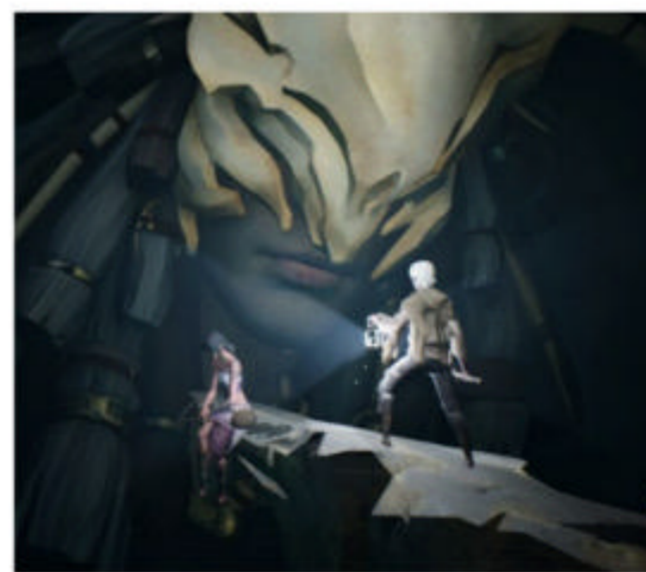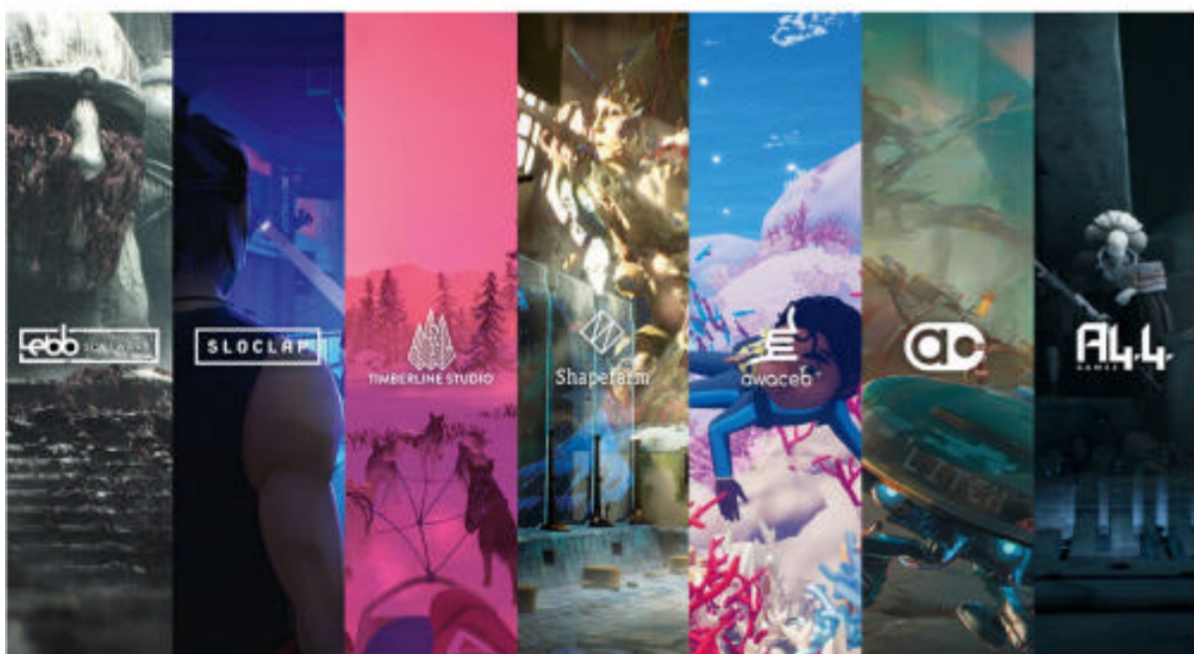
Ashen developer A44 is staffed by veterans of New Zealand special effects company Weta Workshop

Los Angeles' Timberline is another Kepler studio with dev talent from the film industry. Its first game was 2020's *The Red Lantern*
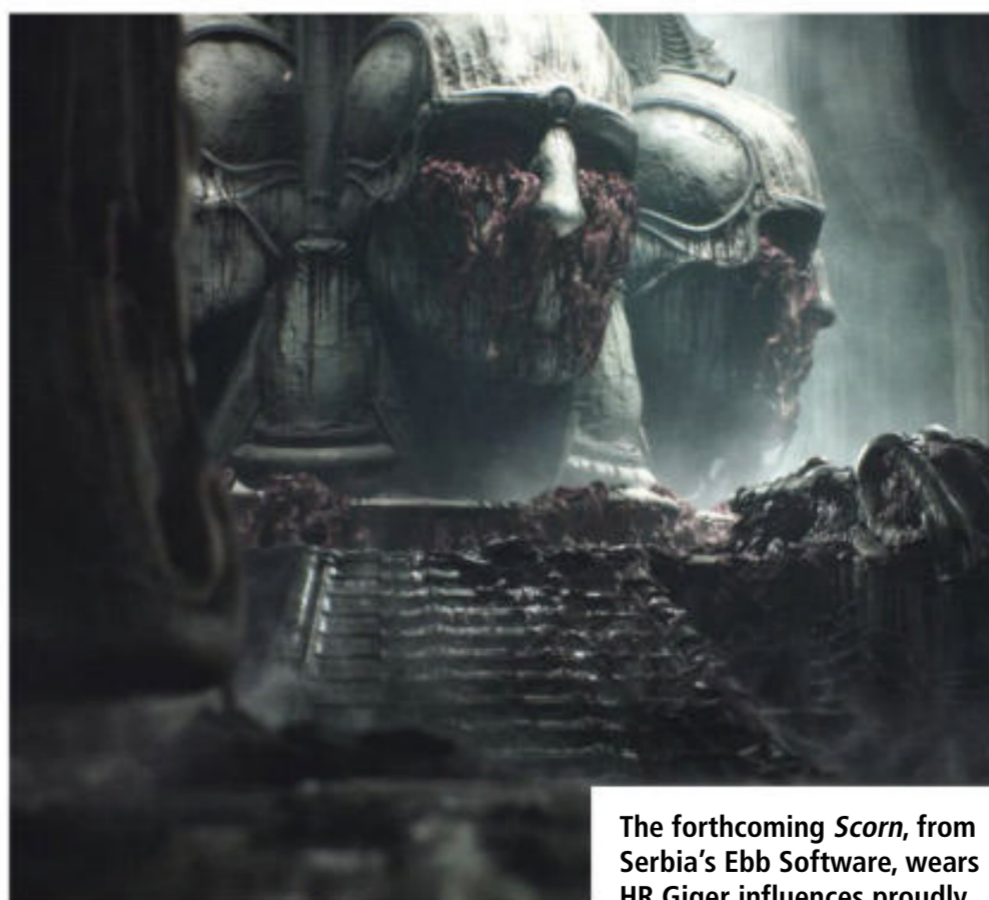
The forthcoming *Scorn*, from Serbia's Ebb Software, wears HR Giger influences proudly

Kepler's founding studios cover a wide range of countries – but neither, notably, of those where the group is headquartered. "We felt like London was a good hub to build a team. There's a lot of local expertise, there's a really vibrant dev industry and we could easily find talent to join the group," Garavaryan says. And it's close to Europe – if only, these days, in the geographical sense. Singapore, meanwhile, gives Kepler a presence in Asia. "It's just the easiest place to do business overall in the region. There's also a burgeoning gaming industry here that has quite a few studios now."

The lady's not for burning

How **Thatcher's Techbase** became the most talked-about videogame satire of 2021

Even if you'd managed to miss the buzz around *Doom* mod *Thatcher's Techbase*, within five minutes of play it's clear why it has struck a chord. Following a brief pre-title and playable credits sequence comes a text introduction that cheekily references The Rise Of Skywalker, likening the surprise return of the former Conservative leader to the equally unwelcome reappearance of Emperor Palpatine. To defeat this deadly threat, it says, "you have no choice but to head to the tenth circle of Hell". There's a brief pause for a paragraph break that really sells the cathartic punchline: "The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland."

"It's funny," the mod's creator, **Jim Purvis**, says. "That was literally ten seconds – me and Richie, the guy who made the trailer, were like, 'What's a quick joke we could make here?' 'Let's say that Britain is Hell'. And it seems to really have taken off. It's the things you think about the least that sometimes seem to resonate with people."

Indeed, it was a single line in a YouTube video that first inspired Purvis. A year ago, he watched Tim Rogers' three-hour-plus review of the original *Doom*. "At one point, Tim says something to the effect of: if you really want to call yourself a *true Doom* fan, you need to try making a map in *Doom*," Purvis recalls. With everywhere starting to lock down for the winter, and with plenty of time on his hands, he opened up 3D map editor Doom Builder, and, with the help of some video tutorials, began to play around with it. By chance, he spotted a meme on his Twitter timeline involving an image of

Doomguy along with a caption. "It said: 'If I'm sent to Hell, I'm going to spend eternity searching for Thatcher'," Purvis laughs. What started as a joke soon snowballed as his Twitter followers chipped in with suggestions.

The result is unruly and rough-hewn in places, but for something that started as a joke, it's more accomplished than you might expect. The soundtrack – from Purvis's friend, *Paradise Killer* composer Barry Topping – is terrific, while Rafael Batista de Lima's sprite art is rich and characterful. "It just kept gaining momentum: every time I asked someone to do me a favour for it, they ended up giving me something really good. And it was like, I don't want to waste really good music or really good artwork on something that is just a pisstake," Purvis says. "Well, it is still kind of a pisstake, I guess, but I wanted to put a wee bit more shine on it."

Yet it's the game's pointed political dimension and cultural reference points that make it stand out most. Hailing from a town near Glasgow, Purvis was already acutely aware of the impact of Thatcherism on friends and family, but began to study her legacy in more detail. "I knew people had [explored] the idea of Margaret Thatcher as a demon before," he says, crediting comics writer Jamie Delano as another vital influence – in particular issue three of Hellblazer that pitches con-artist magician John Constantine against Thatcher. "He gets sent to Hell on the night of the 1987 general election. And the administrators of Hell hope that the

"I don't want to waste really good music or really good artwork on something that is just a pisstake"

Tories are re-elected into office, because it will be great for business in Hell."

From there, Purvis began "a little history side project" that saw him immersing himself in as much reference material from the period as he could find. That manifests in *Thatcher's Techbase* as posters and graffiti, which were directly transplanted from real life, with a couple of minor modifications. The infamous 'New Labour, New Danger' is there, while 'Britain Is Great Again' seems even more shiveringly ominous today. Daubed on a wall is 'We only have to be lucky once' – taken from the IRA statement following the Brighton hotel bombing. The contrast between the fantastical setting and mundanities of 1980s Britain makes it a fascinating piece of satire, one that Purvis hopes will prove cathartic for some. "I think people enjoy seeing real-life locations in videogames that they can relate to. Obviously, dystopias are very common settings for videogames, but I think making a joke out of the idea of Britain as a dystopia lets people relieve a bit of stress and have fun with it."

Quite apart from offering a bolder political statement than *Far Cry 6*, though, *Thatcher's Techbase* is a fascinating microcosm of the current state of play in the videogame industry. Its existence is down to a confluence of modern trends: the influence of YouTube and comic-book stories; the democratisation of creative tools; the viral impact of social media and the ability to crowdsource ideas; and the increasing desire to see personal and political stories reflected in games, despite what certain corners of the Internet might have you believe. Twenty-eight years on, *Doom* has rarely felt quite so relevant – though its antagonist is one creature with whom we wouldn't propose forming an alliance. ■

Reagan's Techbase has been suggested by US players, but Purvis says it would be less authentic were he to make it

CAN IT RUN DOOM?

How Thatcher's Techbase became a console game

Referencing the long-running joke about Id's classic FPS being able to run on almost every electronic device going, Purvis began to investigate which hardware might be able to support *Thatcher's Techbase*. "Most modes can run on anything if they're not too strenuous. I tried to keep the scope of it small enough – unfortunately, it [didn't stretch to] pregnancy tests and fridges and stuff… but then I realised I had a homebrew 3DS at home." So, yes, you can technically play the game on 3DS and Wii, and possibly other console hardware. Visit bit.ly/thatcherstechbase for instructions on how.

PUNY HUMANS

Build a colourful army of pixel-art people – then feed them into an AI-designed meat grinder

Don't get too attached to the humans in *Despot's Game*. The competition in question has been created by d'Spot (a recurring character from developer Konfa's debut, *Despotism 3k*) with design principles akin to another Game that's currently dominating Netflix screens the world over. "D'Spot is a neural network trained on the modern Internet," game creator **Nikolai Kuznetsov** explains. "So it's not strange that he has a bit of a sick taste for entertainment." Battles against demons, robots and man-eating cabbages play out automatically – all you can do to help your little pink stick-figures survive is position them according to the class abilities you've assigned. These range from superheroes and cultists to one class that just throws pretzels. All are given an impressive amount of character in the space of just a few pixels. And, with the game currently in Early Access on PC, the cast of expendables just keeps growing. ■
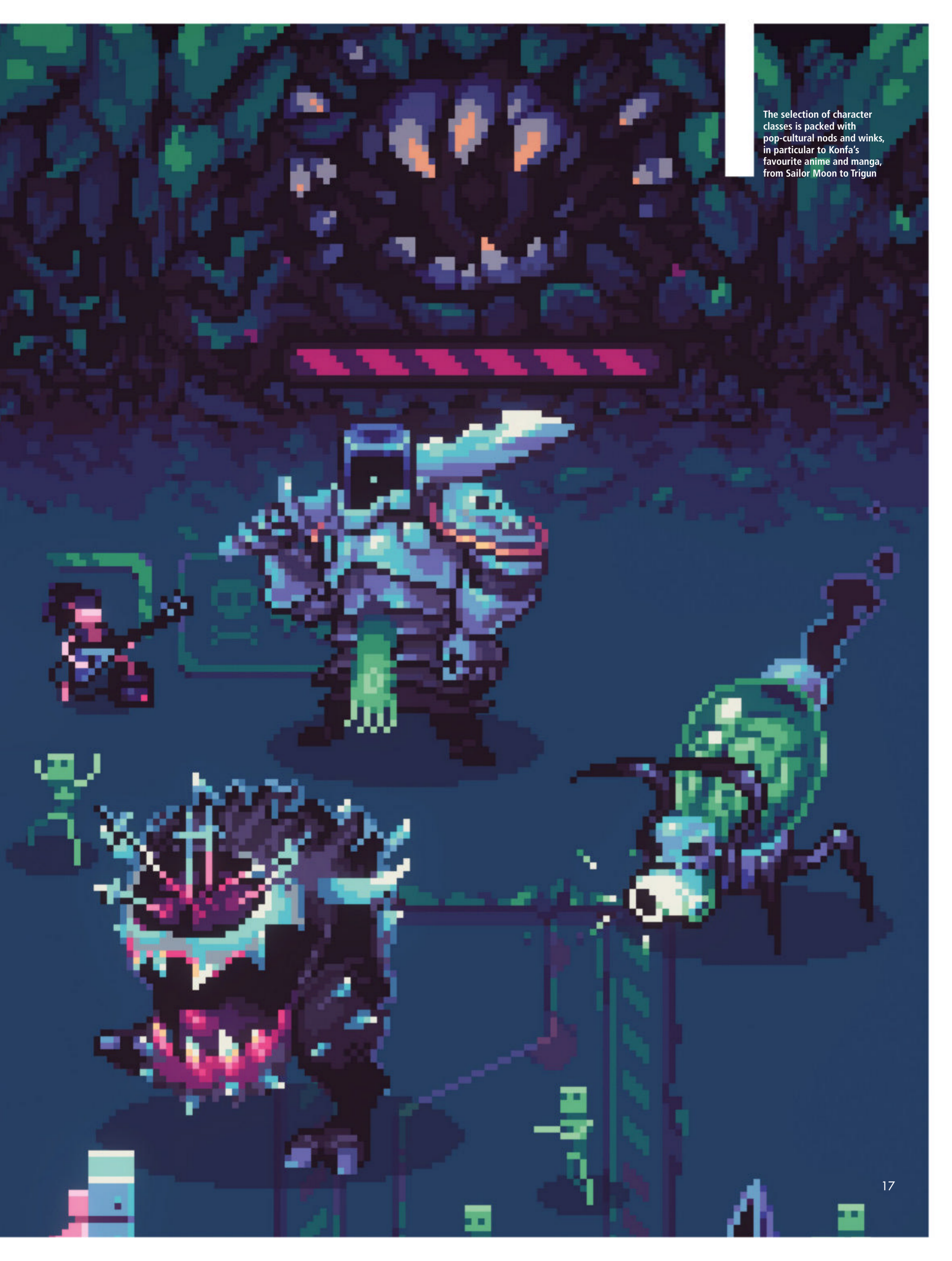
Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"**Violence on screens has grown hugely over the last 30 years**, especially with first party shooter games, and yet violent crime has fallen significantly in many countries."

Netflix's **Ted Sarandos** redefines the meaning of 'FPS' in a memo to staff on the effects of entertainment we consume

"We opened up markets… **People had never played games before PlayStation in the Middle East**."

Reflecting on his company's achievements, Sony Interactive Entertainment boss **Jim Ryan** opts for just making stuff up

"PlayStation undoubtedly had a massive impact on the region, but **to say we never played games here before is remarkably stupid**."

IGN Middle East senior editor **Mufaddal Fakhruddin** is happy to set Ryan straight

"It's just not that hard to treat people fairly and equally. **I've learned that it's not enough to just have good intentions**. It's not enough to wish for diversity."

As he assembles new development studio Possibility Space with colleagues such as Liz England and Jane Ng, former Undead Labs boss **Jeff Strain** sets out to take inclusivity seriously

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

Game Cosmic Digger
Manufacturer Mindware

The most visible pixels in a modern arcade may belong to Raw Thrills' comically oversized *Space Invaders Frenzy* and *World's Largest Pac-Man*, but visual callbacks are happening in parallel among indie-developed games. Alongside *Retro Raccoons* (E364), *Cosmic Digger* makes the case for a chunky aesthetic, brewing up maze-based action that evokes early-'80s coin-ops and then slathering it with enough layers of eye-popping embellishments to make even Jeff Minter blush.

Originally *Heiankyo Alien 3671*, a 2017 PC-based update of 1979 Japanese coin-op *Heiankyo Alien*, the game supports up to four players in the roles of police officers trapping invading aliens. Released for the exA-Arcadia system (below), it's unlikely to sell in big numbers, so make the most of it if you're lucky enough to catch it in the wild.

APP
Kitty Q
bit.ly/kittyq
Edge favourite Philipp Stollenmayer (*Sticky Terms*, *Song Of Bloom*) already has an impressively eclectic catalogue, so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that his latest is a free app – funded by Germany's Federal Ministry Of Education And Research – designed to interest younger players in quantum physics. Essentially an escape room with a half-dead cat host, it works as both a fascinating primer on the subject (and not just for kids – adult players should learn plenty, too) and an engaging puzzler. Whether you're directing cockroaches around puddles of water, stunning flies buzzing around an apple or investigating a piece of cake that smashed a TV while you weren't looking, it finds playful, accessible ways to explain a range of concepts, upon which a charming, in-game 'Kittypedia' elaborates further.

91,390

VIDEO
How An AI Is Becoming The World's Best Pokémon Player
bit.ly/pokemonai
Opening with a mind-boggling bar chart showing how a single turn of *Pokémon* is vastly more complex than other twoplayer strategy games such as chess and Go, this fascinating video from YouTuber The Third Build showcases Future Sight AI, a computer designed to learn how to play *Pokémon* like a human. As its enthusiastic host explains, getting a computer to understand what experienced trainers can naturally intuit is a big ask – while an equally engaging follow-up spotlights the shapeshifting Ditto as Future Sight's worst enemy.

WEB GAME
Echo Beach
bit.ly/echobeachgame
Another game of dystopian deduction from the prolific Tim Sheinman, set in a future when music is prohibited. A coterie of rebels has gathered online to share and discuss songs and flout the ban; your job, as an employee of the Ministry Of Human Correction, is to infiltrate the group, posing as a messageboard poster to pick up clues to their real identities before reporting them to your superiors. Familiarity with subdominant chords, French composers and the work of Neil Young is an advantage, but there are hints subtly squirreled away everywhere, while the tunes (one track is described, remarkably accurately, as 'Elliott Smith does Karma Police') are predictably strong. Drum and chord machines are provided to assist your investigation, but be careful how often you use them.

THIS MONTH ON EDGE

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

HARDWARE
Nintendo Switch – OLED Model
bit.ly/switcholedmodel
An entirely unnecessary upgrade – until you get your hands on it, whereupon it somehow becomes borderline essential. Within an hour of tests – *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*, *Tetris Effect: Connected* and, of course, *Arms* – we're smitten with the vibrancy of the new display, while a kickstand that doesn't have a habit of snapping off should you so much as look at it funny is a welcome bonus if you play a lot of multiplayer games on the go. A luxurious treat, then, though more patient Switch fans – particularly those who primarily play docked – may want to hold off for the next model, which, despite Nintendo's protestations, is surely all but guaranteed.

continue

See the future
Sony's new Game Trials offer a few hours' free play on selected firstparty games…

Crewmates
Fortnite finally credits *Among Us* as inspiration for its Impostors mode…

EMMI winner
The *Metroid* series gets its highest-grossing launch in UK history…

Paradise thriller
A huge *New Horizons* update gives *Animal Crossing* players everything they could have possibly wanted…

quit

Play with limits
…yet the timer starts as soon as the download is triggered. Slow Internet? Tough luck

Sick bae
…though we could have done without the nauseating Twitter love-in that followed

Dread-ful
…but MercurySteam fails to credit staff who left during development

Nook off
…as an eye-watering price hike to Nintendo's 'expanded' online service proves a rather less welcome surprise

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DISPATCHES
CHRISTMAS

Issue 364

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a 12-month Xbox Game Pass Ultimate membership

Stay all day, if you want to

One of the best things I did since COVID-19 hit was get my old university friends into *Final Fantasy XIV*. We figured it would be a good way to catch up whilst also gaming together when we got the chance to. We're all over 30 now with a variety of obligations (them: buying houses, looking after babies; me: researching board games to buy) but more often than not we make Friday evening our gaming night.

We'll log on to *FFXIV* and Discord and start by dance-emoting in one of the main starting cities. We'll talk about our weeks, how families are doing, all that good stuff. We'll then run a couple of dungeons, show off mounts we've acquired, rant about colleagues at work, slay some primals, acquire some gil. And recently we've taken to heading to the Golden Saucer, *FFXIV*'s casino, where we'll take on challenges around the place, playing until the early hours.

It's been really nice to find a game that encourages having fun with friends, and it's been lovely to introduce people close to me to a series I've loved for a long time. Gaming has been a real way for me to connect with others, especially since the first lockdown took place. Whether it's through an online tabletop group, an MMO with friends, or even just remotely playing a *Jackbox Party Pack* with family, I hope after this whole ordeal is over a lot more people can use games to both connect and stay connected with the people they care about.
Barnie Abraham

We've heard lots of stories about the benefits of games in lockdown life — and have some of our own — and even if there's only one positive to come out of all this, we'll take it. A year's worth of Xbox Game Pass Ultimate will help you find plenty more to keep you going well into 2022.

> "Why do I find laborious real-life tasks alluring when presented as a means of entertainment?"

On a wave of mutilation

I hate craneflies. We get hundreds of them each year in our garden, and if I don't spend autumn killing enough of them — or at least showering them with nematodes — then come January their leatherjacket larvae eat up my lawn. And getting rid of them can be a foul, time-consuming, often futile task.

Anyway, as I was preparing to send myself off on another cranefly destruction run, my mind wandered on to what a good game eradicating them could be. Find cranefly, kill cranefly, or when you come back to the same area there'll be lots more craneflies. Maybe you'd get triple points if you find a pair of mating craneflies. What if this were a macabre AR *Pokémon Go*-alike? Gotta squish 'em all.

The point is: why do I find disgusting, laborious real-life tasks alluring when presented as a means of entertainment? Do I just need to gamify things by keeping score, or give myself the prospect of an achievement when I need to do stuff I don't like? Or is there something comforting about doing a task on screen — maybe the safety and abstraction of a digitised rendering; the escapism of knowing that I could put my controller down at any point and be left with an intact lawn?

More generally, I wonder if mundane activities are equally entertaining when the subject matter is close to someone's reality. Do farmers enjoy the sweet banality of *Stardew Valley*? Can forklift truck drivers relax by playing *Shenmue*? Do contract killers wind down by playing some *Hitman*? (OK, maybe not that last one.)

I'd look into this further, but I can see a group of craneflies congregating on my window, and this time I think I can get a high score.
Matt Lucas

You've just reminded us of an entire Sunday afternoon we rinsed down the plughole during the summer playing PowerWash Simulator when we really should've been outside applying the real thing to the patio. Keep us up to speed with your findings, and good luck with the bug hunt.

Don't know about you, but...

I agree with the points raised several issues ago about the murkiness of what digital media might stand for and the direction we are heading. I fondly remember physical games where the manual was more than just the warranty and had maps, lore, artwork. With digital 'things', you don't get that — in fact, it's arguable that you don't get anything at all, except maybe the right to access the media for a certain time, or at a charge, on the understanding that such access may be withdrawn at any time. If that process is transparent, then I agree that it is reasonable. But I am also suspicious of the ease with which digital media can be changed, sometimes without our knowledge. To me, it also raises questions over what the game I've played actually is as a game, if it can be so altered. Is the time spent playing it rendered a vapid example of rampant consumerism if my individual experience is effectively standardised through updates, doctoring, prettification, or shying away from contentious issues? Maybe it's not so much about whether the game is physical or not, but whether our choice of what to put in our libraries is dictated by us as consumers or players.

I find myself re-examining the escapism afforded by games and the link with topical issues (which is good — the more games engage with current affairs, the better) and I would be interested to know whether others are becoming more discerning over what they play — and if issues such as digital versus physical, toxic work cultures or green gaming, for instance, factor into decisions over what to play. And if that affects your enjoyment of the game.

I also think it's worth highlighting the positives of digital storefronts in terms of providing a much bigger playerbase with access to a huge variety of games. If that tempts people to try games/genres they wouldn't normally, then that can only be a good thing. And presumably there is some kind of analytics in the background allowing the likes of Microsoft, Apple, Sony etc to identify what people are interested in in order to (hopefully) provide development funding for (hopefully) the smaller studios producing some of the more interesting content available. Or, I suppose, they could be using those same analytics to figure out further ways to turn us into mindless Party representatives, ready to march willingly into what Robert Frazer said in **E**359 about Orwell's endless Present, 'in which the Party was always right'.
Nick Croman

Hey, where have you been?

Metroid Dread's developers heralded the return of sequence breaking in their game and the community rejoiced! Breaking the order of events is an awesome experience. It's one of the few ways a player can liberate themselves from the oppressive nature of predetermined narratives. It is play at its purest.

Going somewhere you aren't 'supposed to go' might help you speed through a game faster, but it might also get you stuck. Even worse, it might give you an item so early that it makes the game too easy. For this excitement to last, the player has to believe they might be doing something the developers didn't anticipate. Playtesting guarantees things will be all right. Glitches do not.

That's why *Cruelty Squad* is so engrossing: you're never sure if you're still in a dialogue with its maker. The same can be said about *Super Metroid*: some of its secret moves are not acknowledged by the world's design. And yet, the game never breaks. Is this luck, or were the developers cleverly fooling us?

Now there is a sequence break that's been making the headlines. (Since less than one per cent of *Dread*'s players will discover this by themselves, I wouldn't call this a spoiler.) You're 'supposed to' get the bombs after defeating a certain boss, but with a couple of tricky jumps you can get them earlier for the fight — and using them grants you a glorious cutscene. In other words: the developers anticipated this happening.

This is really cool. It's the kind of thing that shows the artistic merits of the medium. And I expect it to inspire sequence breaking in other games, which I applaud. But it also has me thinking: if the game is designed around being broken in such a way, did we really break it? Perhaps such a cutscene tragically changes an incredible deed into something common. Shine spark get!
Robert August de Meijer

Talking of Super Metroid secrets, did you ever try to get to the top of that shaft via morph-ball bombs? We still get flashbacks today.

It shakes my teeth

A few words about the subscriber cover art for **E**364, if I may. Please do remember that a good number of us have small children at home. I mean, if I'm honest, it gives me the shivers, too. Can we perhaps save horror for the inside pages, so people have a bit more choice about what they see each time they pick an issue? I guess I can't really expect you not to try something a bit edgy from time to time, but surely there are plenty of other ways to get our attention? Now, the *Sable* cover art (**E**362), on the other hand, was a thing of beauty. I've appreciated the recent focus on games with distinctive art styles (*Jett*, *Deathloop*). I'm glad you celebrate games as an art form — what better medium for that than a print magazine? Let's have plenty more of that and remember that a good number of us aren't really into horror or hyperviolence.
Tom Dore

Sorry for the fright, Tom. We won't make a habit of it. In the meantime, maybe keep that particular issue under your mattress. ■

STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

The idea that play can have a profound effect on the psyche of the player, for good or ill, is very old. The philosopher Plato wrestled at the Isthmian Games (part of the ancient Olympic cycle), and suggested, radically for the time, that children's games could be educational. Modern research suggests that playing videogames such as *Tetris* soon after a traumatic event might help to prevent the memories being laid down in such a way as to give rise to later PTSD, and there is a flowering of games, such as *Depression Quest*, explicitly presented as therapeutic devices.

Many of us, of course, find therapeutic value in simply knocking off the day's work in order to shoot large numbers of men in the face. (I very much regret that there is no *Time Crisis* available for modern consoles.) The mass murder of deserving terrorists, or floaty platforming in an emo comics world, or driving virtual cars around grey racetracks — these can all be therapeutic in exactly the same way, by giving jangling nerves something to do and relieving stress through the calming influence of repetitive motion.

But a player might be in the mood for something more explicit, such as Vivien Ha's beautiful point-and-clicker, *Off Day*. Not at all my normal genre of game, but I was entranced from the beginning by the animation aesthetics and writing of this modest tale of Melody, who doesn't want to get out of bed, and her pet dog, and her caring flatmate. The game leads us compassionately through Melody's experience but, crucially, doesn't ask us to try to solve her problems for her. It is enough just to remain mindfully within the game's empathetic ambience.

And this relatively new medium — a videogame that lasts 30 minutes — is arguably the ideal form for art to address issues of mental health. Because, after all, a person with depression often won't be able to pick up a book, even if they normally enjoy reading (which is why the genre term 'visual novel' feels misplaced here), while a TV show is
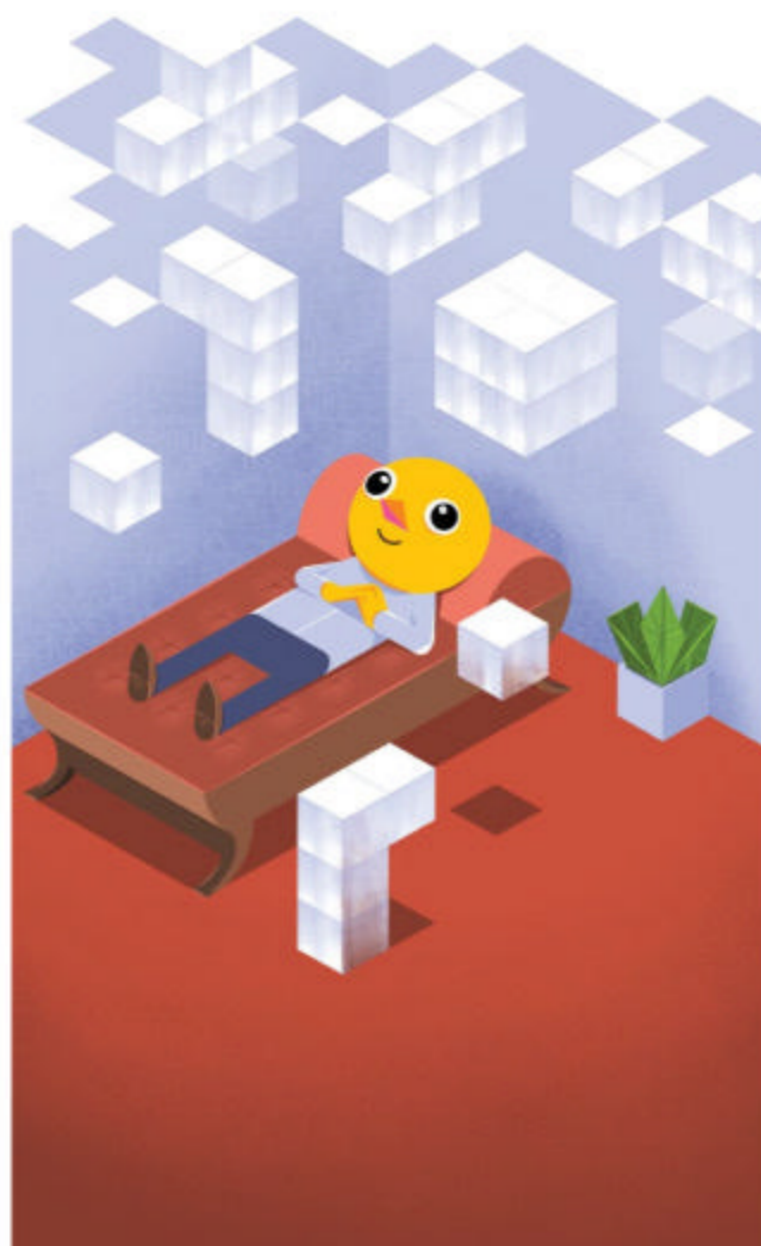
Playing Tetris might help to prevent the memories being laid down in such a way as to give rise to later PTSD

obliged to be multi-threaded and plot-driven. A short game, though, is free to linger in one mood, and simply to exist as a virtual holding hand, reminding the player she is not alone.

An extremely twisted take on the idea of games as therapy, by contrast, is offered by one of those multi-threaded and plot-driven TV shows, Squid Game. This South Korean masterpiece of black comedy and ultraviolence enriches the standard Battle Royale topos with its ludic but serious political ideas. The crushing burden of debt for so many modern city-dwellers motivates the players' entry into the game, if with less

than fully informed consent, but what convinces them to stay is the game's own sadistic egalitarianism.

The boss's consigliere, with his eerie faceted mask, black or bronze according to the lighting, that resembles a low-polygon human face from a 1990s videogame, explains repeatedly that the games are morally pure because — unlike in the outside world — everyone has an equal chance. One might object that equality of opportunity, in a system of enforced ignorance where one's pre-game choices might effectively doom one's prospects of staying alive, is not all that fair — but this stochastic unfairness, too, applies to everyone equally.

The mysterious organisation that hosts the game has as its brand symbol a square, triangle, and circle, sigils repeated to signal rank on the guards' blackened fencing masks, and it is surely no coincidence that these are three of the four PlayStation symbols too. An aficionado might even see, in the beautifully weird shots of players trudging up Escherian staircases painted in troublingly pastel shades of blue and pink, a nod to *Echochrome*. But Squid Game exists in a thematic parallel with videogames rather than attempting to be an allegory of them: the childish games the prisoners are forced to play are all the more insulting and terrifying precisely because they are so arbitrary and simple, depending as much on pure luck as on skill.

And for many of the players the games do turn out to be bizarrely therapeutic, even if they're about to die: the brutal clarity of their situation enables some to experience an authentic human connection with their fellows. For the audience, watching the show can be as therapeutic as playing *Off Day*, to the extent that we experience the terror at second hand while giving thanks that we are not in the same situation. Consolation may not be the only business of art (or, indeed, philosophy), but it is one of its superpowers.

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

SAM BARLOW

Unreliable Narrator

Exploring stories in games and the art of telling tales

While I can trot out any number of more obscure interactive fiction titles or pieces of cinema and literature that have gotten me to the place I currently inhabit as a game director and writer, it's fair to say that *Metroid* has been the thing that has inspired me the most. It's Samus who points to the future and crystallises for me why videogames are the medium worthy of my labour.

Staring at a map screen. Looking at the negative space carved out by the rooms I have discovered and trying to imagine which chunks of darkness hide secret areas. Looking for a telltale gap or a dead end that might be worth investigating. Sometimes it is just a dead end. Sometimes it's a cubby-hole with an extra missile. Then sometimes an entire area opens up — a cavern, a secret laboratory, a bird-god temple — unspooling across your map. Games before *Super Metroid* had dealt in puzzles and mazes, but few had made this meta brain tinkering the minute-to-minute focus of the player. All the backtracking and scrutiny are transformative. Familiarity and mastery of the map makes it real and it becomes imprinted on your imagination. Most games aren't like this — you enjoy them in the moment, the content sluicing through and out of your mind like nutrient goo.

Playing a *Metroid* game flicks a switch and makes me more aware of my environment outside the game. When I'm autopiloting from apartment to subway, I think about how Samus might run through a corridor for the hundredth time, headed back to try to uncover a missed item. *Metroid* takes how we navigate familiar spaces and superimposes it on an alien planet. More: it gives us permission to jump over that wall, nip into that alleyway, duck under that hole in the fence and explore. It weaponises curiosity. The way that *Metroid* takes this curiosity, and asks more of it — asks for focus, asks us to give over our imagination to build a world — this is what I take to heart when thinking about interactive narrative.

I was also thinking specifically of the greatest moment in 3D videogames — the visor flash in Metroid Prime

The fusion of an immersive, atmospheric world with the dry interface of the map screen: a marriage of opposites, but one that makes the best of our hybrid medium. It is true that when I made *Her Story* I was thinking of *Metroid*. I was also thinking specifically of the greatest moment in 3D videogames — the visor flash in *Metroid Prime*. *Metroid* has always played games with its protagonist: the NES game hid their gender from the player, revealing on completion that the armoured space warrior was a woman, demonstrating the series' love of Aliens. *Metroid Prime* engaged with this established protagonist gamesmanship with verve. First, Nintendo and Retro Studios gave us the most immersive videogame yet created, moulding a traditional game UI into the HUD of Samus's robot suit. The game puts us in her POV seamlessly. It's a labour of love. For example: the icons for each of Samus's weapons correspond to different hand shapes — if you use the X-Ray visor you can see that, when switching weapons, the bones of Samus's hand move to reflect this as she manipulates her weapon systems with her gaming hand. So good! Then the game does something amazing: at the height of a battle, in the midst of the most intense and immersive drama, an explosion rocks the screen — and in the white-hot blast we see the reflection on Samus's visor of her own face. We are reminded that we are looking through the eyes of someone else. This doesn't break the immersion, only re-doubles it: Samus is real, and we're along for the ride.

Games have always been pretty childish when promising firstperson experiences. They equate this with an invisible or absent protagonist. They ignore the rich layering that comes with narratives delivered in firstperson. Experiencing a firstperson narrative does not dissolve our own self, or that of the character we inhabit. The distance that is irreducible in this experience creates something special — *we* see the world from the inside out *simultaneously* as we see it from outside in. This is a rare POV we can never occupy in our own lives, outside of retrospect. In service of a game about jumping through space caves and shooting bugs, *Metroid Prime* gave us this experience — and pointed to a more sophisticated approach to the videogame protagonist. The marriage of interface and character, distance plus closeness: a true firstperson experience. It looks to a future that is largely unexplored. It's a good time to use a power bomb on our medium and see where Samus can take us.

Sam Barlow is the founder of NYC-based Drowning A Mermaid Productions. He can be found on Twitter at @mrsambarlow
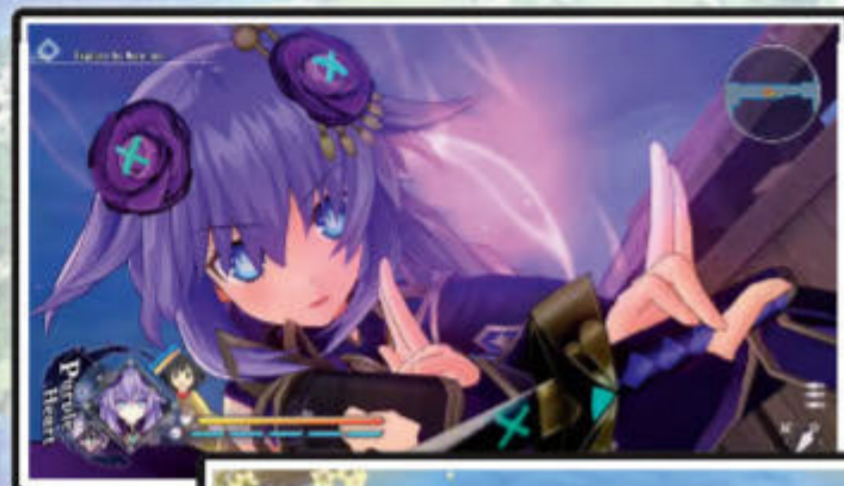
H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

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

And away…

Every videogame needs a hook – something to grab players and keep them wriggling on the line. Yet from a designer's point of view, sometimes it makes sense to set them loose: leave that float dangling to lure them back, sure, but it's only right and proper that they should be released, and given the chance to swim free.

Of course, if you're going to do that, you need to give them something else to nibble on. And this month's Hype selection offers plenty of temptation to roam. *The Gunk* sees *SteamWorld* developer Image & Form wander off its usual path, to an alien world where your reward for vacuuming up the titular gloop is colourful bursts of extraterrestrial flora. And should you happen to tire of tidying, you can always explore off the beaten track, gathering materials and scouting the environment for kit upgrades to make the cleanup more efficient.

You can't wander too far in Ichigoichie's *Backbeat*, but as puzzlers go, you're afforded a rare amount of freedom in how you solve its grid-based challenges. The route you take to reach your destination, meanwhile, transforms the music generated by your four-piece funk band. Roguelike *Midautumn* might follow in the footsteps of Supergiant's *Hades*, but its characters aren't bound to any individual mythology, its ancestral spirits embracing the broad range of cultures in the Asian diaspora.

Then there's *Oxenfree II: Lost Signals*, which lets you choose protagonist Riley's route to the elevated points at which she's tasked with placing transmitters on the island sprawl of Camena, which is haunted by a double threat of ghosts and a deadly cult. Along the way, she'll receive requests from frightened residents over her walkie-talkie: Night School Studio insists that these aren't really side quests at all, but storylines that happen to overlap with the main plot. All the more reason, in other words, to follow the advice of this issue's cover game.

MOST WANTED

Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League PC, PS5, Xbox Series
Warner's DC FanDome event offered a glimpse at Rocksteady's first game since 2015's *Arkham Knight*, and it's fair to say the tone is more James Gunn than David Ayer. No gameplay footage yet, alas, but the in-engine trailer of Task Force X in action taking on Batman, Superman et al is thrilling, funny and visually dazzling. Roll on next year.

Metroid Prime 4 Switch
With *Dread* completed, our attention inevitably turns to Retro's long-gestating sequel, which could certainly learn a few things from MercurySteam's effort – not least remembering to credit everyone who lends their talents to its production.

Hollow Knight: Silksong PC, Switch
And while we're on the subject of Metroidvanias, it's about time this resurfaced, isn't it. Team Cherry doesn't really seem the type for glitzy bashes, but could *Silksong* yet make a surprise appearance at The Game Awards?

THE GUNK

Goo your own way

Developer/publisher	Thunderful (Image & Form)
Format	PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Origin	Sweden
Release	December

As he guides us into another alien cavern stained with black goo, oozing like sentient tar, we find ourselves wondering about the state of game director **Ulf Hartelius**'s living room. "This game is perfect for anyone who doesn't enjoy cleaning, but enjoys *having* cleaned," he says, sucking up a phlegmy deposit with player-character Rani's wrist-mounted hoover. "Which is me. I don't like the act of cleaning, but I love just after it's been done." He pulls one last gobbet loose. "And that's kind of what you get in this game. Because the cleaning itself is done in hyper-speed — it takes a couple of seconds and you're instantly rewarded."

He's not wrong. With all that gunk shifted, the cavern blooms into life. As plants spring up from rock, it does indeed tickle the same part of us that takes satisfaction from surveying a freshly sparkling home. This tidy-up has in-game benefits, too, a plant bridge unfurling like some enormous tongue and granting access to the next area.

This is *The Gunk*'s core mechanic: a spin on the vacuum-cleaning antics of *Luigi's Mansion*, where your targets aren't ghosts but clouds of muck. As you'd expect from the maker of the *SteamWorld* games, though, Image & Form is ready to squeeze this simple idea for everything it's worth. Rani's huge power-fist gadget can also be used to grab bits of friendly alien flora: seeds that can be planted to grow into platforms, or explosive fruits that can be launched at loose areas of wall.

The fist can also be used in combat, with the gunk spewing out enemies that challenge you in a more active fashion. "The combat in this game is pretty straightforward, but we really tried to make use of the core mechanic of absorbing," Hartelius says. We see some generic headcrab types, which can be sucked up then tossed back at their compatriots to take out two at once, but Hartelius promises that this is the just the start: "With every new enemy, there's a new twist on these mechanics, a new way to defeat it." There's talk of a creature you must rip apart bit by bit, and one from which you must suck the "evil fluid".

It sounds surprisingly *Doom Eternal*, given *The Gunk*'s strictly PG style — but then the *SteamWorld* games always specialised in making existing genres approachable for a younger audience. Despite the move away from that setting, this is no exception. "As with our previous games, I really want this to be a good first game of its kind for players who may not be used to thirdperson action adventures like this," Hartelius says. "Same as we did with *Heist* being a good first tactics game."

As for the thinking behind those moves, he says: "While the *SteamWorld* series' charm ▶

"The game has an ecological subtext," Hartelius says. "But at its heart, it's an adventure story about these two characters [Rani and Becks] exploring and braving this planet and its dangers"

Rani's equipment can be upgraded by gathering materials and scanning the world. This is all optional, Hartelius stresses, but it does mean that diligent explorers will be rewarded with the best kit

and sense of humour lies close to our hearts, we'd also been wanting to make something different for a long time. We'd been itching to do something more 'grown-up'." (The setting isn't going anywhere — multiple *SteamWorld* games are in development.) "While deciding to do something different was easy, the scary part was executing on the idea. The gunk itself was a tremendous technical challenge, and the game has a greater focus on narrative than anything we'd worked on before."

Chief among those challenges, we'd imagine, was the move into 3D, and the step away from the studio's own engine and into Unreal. The number of hands on deck has grown accordingly, though not by as much as you might expect — "we've hovered around the 25 to 30 mark", Hartelius says, compared to around 20 staff on *SteamWorld Dig 2*. Perhaps more important is that Image & Form is now able to call on the resources of

"That's something that Image & Form has always done: respecting the player's time"

Thunderful Group, the Swedish development supergroup formed through its mergers with Zoink and, subsequently, Bergsala.

The Gunk's 3D art is being handled by The Station — another Swedish team acquired by Thunderful, best known for outsourcing on *LittleBigPlanet* projects — with some Zoink developers coming aboard as work on *Lost In Random* started to wind down. "We brought in some great people from there who could bring whatever they learned making that game to help make this shine," Hartelius says. Given the former's experience with Sackboy, and the stop-motion style of *Lost In Random*, there's a clumpy physicality to the visuals that feels like the natural product of this union.

Your interactions with the world have the same quality. While our demo is hands-off, we can practically feel the elastic twang as a cannonball-sized seed is pulled from its root. While it puts us in mind of *Astro's Playroom*, the churning, fluid way the gunk moves as it's sucked up is reminiscent of less pleasant

experiences involving a vacuum cleaner and deep-pile carpet. As each build-up of gunk is cleared, the remnant morphs dynamically — you can carve out hollows then leave it to collapse back into shape. These are the kinds of small, brightening touches that have helped Image & Form's games claim a place close to our heart, and a sign that working with other teams hasn't diluted the studio's charms.

Expect to discover more of these in the finished game. No particular interaction (platforming, puzzling, combat, hoovering) will last too long before you're onto the next thing, Hartelius says. "That's something that Image & Form has always done: respecting the player's time. We've continuously opted for smaller areas, less repeating of challenges, and just having as many new things to keep things fresh and interesting for as long as possible."

The idea, it seems, is to make a game that pulsates, flows and shifts shape just like the substance that gives it its title. And it's all in service, Hartelius tells us, of a greater whole: instilling a sense of exploration in the player. This world has a rich past to uncover, involving (of course) a lost alien civilisation that built some of the ornate structures we see Rani exploring. Hartelius rattles off some of the questions we'll be dealing with: "How did the Gunk get here? What was the relation between the gunk and the people that lived here? And, do they *still* live here?"

Whatever the answers, it's clear this world has much to reward explorers. We're shown jungles in the shade of towering mushrooms; alien fauna hopping across floral platforms, before being plunged into the darkness of a mine with huge circular doors carved into the rock; and one area that looks like it's been taken from a different world entirely, with veins of orange light running along Giger-esque structures cloaked in fog. Anyone who has explored the depths of *SteamWorld Dig* and its sequel will know what kind of surprises Image & Form likes to tuck away beneath its games' sunny surfaces. For those all-important newcomers, though, *The Gunk* should make for a pleasant surprise — one that will hopefully encourage them to dig up the decade of great games that brought the studio to this point. Now, doesn't that sound much more enjoyable than cleaning? ■

March of progress

Rani might be your avatar, but it's clear who the real star is here – it's their name up in lights, after all. The gunk is a marvel, constantly bubbling away in a way that feels unsettlingly organic, and reacting fluidly to your actions. This is thanks, in part, to 'ray marching', an algorithm that works with signed distance functions to create complex, interlocking 3D shapes in realtime. "The tech itself isn't new, but it's seldom used in games, and extremely rarely used for effects that the player has control over," Hartelius explains. A more common use case is creating believable clouds, he says – "but we really wanted to see: what can we do with this that has never been done before? And how could a game take shape from that?"

TOP **The planet Rani explores doesn't have a name, or at least not one Hartelius willing to share: "It is uncharted territory, and its original name is never discovered in the story."** RIGHT **Back at camp, you'll be able to craft using the resources gathered out in the world, and catch up with companions Becks (human) and C-RT (robot).**

TOP **While we're not particularly keen on grinding for upgrades, the springy animation involved in gathering natural resources does occasionally help sell Rani's role as a botanist unafraid to dirty her hands.** ABOVE **There are many optional routes to explore in** *The Gunk*'s **world but Hartelius explains that this is essentially a linear challenge: "It's not an open-world game or anything."** MAIN **Rani's central gadget is controlled via a shooter reticule, so it's no surprise when we catch a glimpse of some manner of death-ray attachment – though in our hands-off demo we only see it used to open doors**

OXENFREE II: LOST SIGNALS

The ghosts are back — and this time they've brought a cult

Developer	Night School Studios
Publisher	MWM Interactive
Format	PC, PS4, PS5, Switch
Origin	US
Release	2022

When we first meet *Oxenfree II*'s protagonist Riley Poverly, she's attempting to jump between clifftops, asserting to her companion Jacob that she will be absolutely fine. As it turns out, Riley is very much not fine, and so, one hard landing later, we see her taking the long way around. As much fun as the scene is, it's also a fine way to showcase Riley's proactive, no-nonsense character — where the first game followed a bunch of teens fleeing for their lives, *Oxenfree II*'s 30-year-old heroine is ready to meet danger head-on. This time the threat comes from a shadowy religious cult called Parentage which is actively trying to lure ghosts to the island of Camena, just a short distance from Edwards Island, where it all began. Riley, meanwhile, is tasked with placing transmitters around the island in an attempt to gain information and close the tears the cult has created in the space-time continuum.

"With this one we get to the chaos a lot sooner because we assume that hopefully people will have played the first one," Night School Studio director and co-founder **Sean Krankel** says. "It was a challenge for us to subvert your expectations, retain the feel of the first one but ultimately take a lot of different twists and turns." The first section we get to see, however, feels immediately familiar — Riley and Jacob make their way through a forest, chatting all the while, the scene underscored by a pleasantly creepy soundtrack composed once again by Andrew 'Scntfc' Rohrmann. As in Night School's previous games, Riley has three options for how to respond in conversations, or she can choose to stay silent altogether.

Most of the sequel's new elements result from the change in location. Camena is a lot bigger than Edwards Island, which on a practical level means a lot more walking and climbing. One new feature, the time tears, leads to some light environmental puzzles. Using the portable radio that played such a pivotal part in the first game, Riley and Jacob enter a tear in a mine, only to be transported to an earlier point in time when a still-functioning elevator is key to them making it out unscathed.

While the first *Oxenfree* had a time-travel element, Krankel says the two ideas are not related. "Like the first game, *Oxenfree II* takes place across one night. The tears help reduce the feeling of it being a mad dash against the clock," he explains. "You can meet new characters in time tears and solve problems in different ways than the other game had the opportunity for, and they also give us a way to tell a richer narrative — more of these tears will pop up over time, ▶

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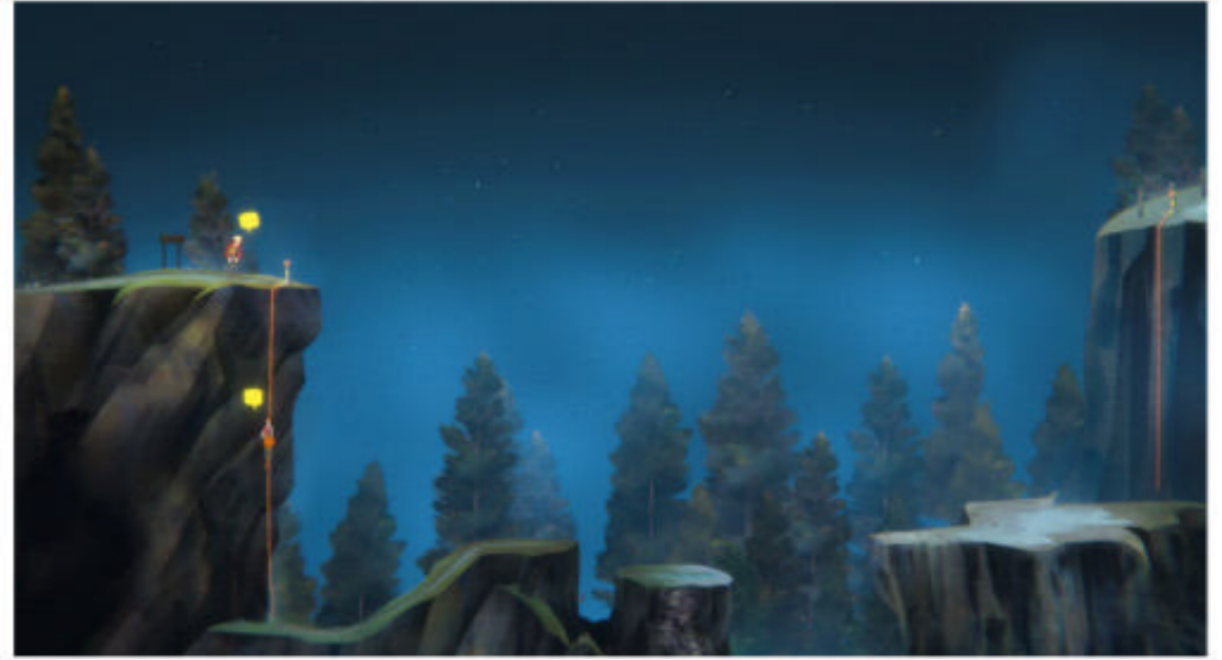
ABOVE **While her job as a researcher has Riley placing transmitters around Camena, from the looks of it she will also step fearlessly into the ghost portals she finds.**
TOP RIGHT **Expect a lot more climbing from** *Oxenfree 2* – **Camena is much larger than Edwards Island, and you're free to approach your journey however you like.**
MAIN **Errands for other residents of Camena will lead you all around the island. Here, Riley has collected someone's backpack, but not everything will be a fetch quest.**
BELOW LEFT **The conversation option you choose can have a much bigger impact than it would in the original game.**
BELOW RIGHT **A time tear can lead into the past or to different places altogether**

so there will be something new to explore in areas you've already visited." The radio remains a way to contact supernatural beings, though Krankel hints that how you do this, and the exact nature of these entities, may surprise players.

While Riley's overall goal is to reach elevated points across the island in order to place the transmitters, the route she takes is up to you, leading to a substantial increase in player freedom. "As long as important emotional beats or plot revelations happen at the prescribed time, they can happen anywhere. We have to make sure that these main quests don't gobble up any sidequests," co-founder and lead writer **Adam Hines** explains. "It's a fun challenge to ensure that the story, even with any content that you missed, feels like the definitive one."

Those sidequests are another new feature, born from the fact that many of Camena's residents naturally see their lives transformed by the arrival of ghosts and an evil cult. Riley carries a walkie-talkie with which she can make and receive calls, and from time to time someone may reach out with a request. Krankel stresses that these requests aren't random. "We call them sidequests internally but they're not really side content," he says. "Think of it as a bunch of storylines in a book that gradually overlap. Your primary goal is to stop Parentage from wreaking any more havoc, and it just so happens that the people of Camena are affected by it. Their stories intrinsically tie to yours." And the residents of Camena aren't simply bodiless voices: you can meet them in different locations around the island.

This larger environment, and the resulting opportunity for more conversations, also affects the ways in which the narrative can branch and ultimately lead to one of *Oxenfree II*'s many endings. Some choices have foreseeable consequences (depending on whether or not you choose to help someone, you may receive a follow-up call or assistance with another problem later in the game, for example), but to create interesting choices and outcomes is a process with a lot of moving parts.

"We always have in mind how characters start and how they end, and the output that the player can affect — how to make that feel cool but also make sense, and also to elevate the choices players naturally would want to make," Hines says. "If you decide to go through the woods instead of along the beach and make a bunch of very important decisions there, you'll end up having wildly different conversations with the ghosts than another player could have." And those specific events, he adds, will continue to ripple outward through the game. "We have to limit ourselves to certain key events to keep the game produceable, and also keep a tally of your Riley and how other characters see you that you as a player can understand and hopefully tap into."

Night School promises that Riley's own story still plays an important part in the events of *Oxenfree II*, just as Alex

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Krankel hints that the exact nature of the supernatural entities will surprise players

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confronting her past in the first game led to key revelations. The studio affectionately calls the game a "coming-of-age story in your 30s" that will ultimately explain why Riley chose to get involved with Parentage, while also stressing that the overall stakes are much higher. "Parentage are pulling on the threads of how all reality is tied," Hines explains. "They are a lot more obviously antagonistic than the ghosts in *Oxenfree*, with the safety of a town and the whole planet at stake, if you will."

With ghosts, time tears and what sounds like a classic group of antagonists, it seems the world of *Oxenfree* has become a lot more densely populated and interconnected. Yet while the sequel promises plenty of scares and weirdness, as we watch Riley and Jacob play a game of One Word Story shortly after having travelled back in time, we realise the most enjoyable thing about *Oxenfree* has always been its tone — its characters singularly dedicated to shrugging mildly in the face of danger. ∎

Altered frequencies

Most sequels contain a number of throwbacks to prior events, and despite introducing a whole new cast, *Oxenfree II* is no different. However, the references to *Oxenfree* aren't limited to a few Easter eggs. Instead, Night School sneaked Parentage into the PC version of *Oxenfree*, adding new frequencies with messages that suggest someone is listening in and trying to subtly influence events. This not only means the cult has been following the supernatural occurrences on and around Edwards Island for quite some time, but that players may have unwittingly aided them in their goal of messing with time all along. This connection could either be an inventive marketing strategy or a way to offer a wholly different point of view of past events, including that mysterious phrase "Is leave possible?"

H|Y|P|E

FINAL FANTASY XIV: ENDWALKER

Bringing out the scythes for the first saga's finale

MMORPGs aren't designed to end — and if they do it's not with a bang but a whimper, as player numbers dwindle before servers are unceremoniously shut down. Of course, *Final Fantasy XIV*, now at its most popular with over 24 million registered users, is far from over. Its latest expansion is comparable to Avengers: Endgame, which merely draws a line under one phase of the MCU before the next begins.

Having settled aeon-spanning conflicts, liberated nations and gone to another world entirely, you have to wonder where this epic MMORPG can go from here. But as we wander the opulent, isolated city of Old Sharlyan and take a mount through the vibrant geography of new India-inspired region Thavnair, *FFXIV* continues to boast arguably the strongest art direction of any MMORPG. That's not limited to beautiful environments either, as we finally take the fight to the Garlean Empire's doorstep, its ruined capital looking even gloomier than Midgar.

Our hands-on ahead of *Endwalker*'s release later this month gives nothing away plot-wise, and if the story is even half as momentous as the acclaimed *Shadowbringers*, then far be it from us to spoil anything for you. After playing tourist in the new locales, it's time to party up for the new dungeon, Tower Of Zot. The build we're playing is not the final version, but we're soon humbled by what the first dungeon's foes can do to our party — even with job levels and gear sets at the new Level 90 cap. Indeed, even the sub-bosses prove a tough hurdle as we take time parsing their complex attack patterns. For veteran players who have acclimated to *FFXIV*'s

The winged horse Arion is the latest available mount, while users can also finally create a male viera character

In a neat touch, you can actually fight alongside the Warrior Of Light's companions

escalating challenges over the years, you'd expect nothing less.

The challenge also arises from figuring out the new jobs, which automatically give you over a dozen new abilities and hotkeys to memorise; additions to the previous 18, on the other hand, are incremental. We can't resist giving the new Reaper job a whirl. Fast and furious swipes with their scythes animate as smoothly as anything you might expect from PlatinumGames, while a Soul gauge can be charged up to unleash even more devastating attacks.

While MMORPGs are, by definition, designed to be experienced alongside other human players, it's also possible to run dungeons with an AI party via the Trust System. In a neat touch, you can actually fight alongside the Warrior Of Light's companions, including returning fan-favourite dragoon Estinien. The downside is that if you're unfortunate enough to die, you don't get

TOP **If bosses are difficult to parse, avoiding AOEs is a good starting point. In this case, party members dallying in the white spaces are liable to be hit with lightning.**
ABOVE **It's always worth going over the strategy with teammates before crossing the threshold.**
RIGHT **We suspect new job Reaper will be a popular one with** *Endwalker* **players**

Skip straight to the end?

Newcomers will undoubtedly be enticed to *FFXIV* by *Endwalker*, and tempted to rush through what already exists. But while it will be possible to spend real money to acquire an item that lets you skip the story – thereby missing out on some of the finest tales ever told in a *Final Fantasy* game – Yoshida would naturally prefer them not to do this. "In other MMOs, you might find that as soon as a new expansion releases, no one is playing content from the older expansion, but for *FFXIV*, this isn't the case," he says, in reference to the Duty Roulettes that reward veterans who match with newcomers in older dungeons. "If anything, existing players would talk to those new players, and just reassure them that they don't really have to rush."

revived but must restart the fight, after being bumped back to the start of the dungeon. As an alternative for players reluctant to play with others, the system was also introduced rather late to previous expansion *Shadowbringers*. As producer and director **Naoki Yoshida** admits, "We thought that if we always just leave it to one side, we would never be able to get it done. So we decided, in order to properly implement the Trust System, we would have to start with the latest content first."

While it's not been confirmed whether the Trust System will eventually be incorporated into older dungeons, essentially making it possible to experience *FFXIV*'s main story as

a singleplayer RPG, Yoshida does rule out an offline version akin to what Square Enix is doing for Japan-exclusive MMORPG *Dragon Quest X*. "We would have to recreate all of the fields contained in the MMO world; it would have to be a selection process about which quests we would keep or cut, and this kind of task we would obviously have to be in charge of doing," he explains. In other words, it simply isn't something the team can consider when their duty is expanding *FFXIV*. Fortunately, it means fans can be assured the only tears they'll be shedding will be for *Endwalker*'s emotional climax to a decade-long saga, not for the end of a beloved MMORPG. ■

HYPE

A MEMOIR BLUE

When childhood feels like only yesterday

Shelley Chen is prepared for some people not to like *A Memoir Blue*. Imagining the response from some quarters to this lyrical tale about a woman recalling key moments from her childhood, she pulls a face and puts on a voice that sounds like a child having a tantrum. "'This is not a game and I hate it'," she growls, before laughing. "I'll take that as a compliment. Because I never intended to make like a gamey game. I treat it like an interactive story, like a book, or a movie." And if people do say they hate it? "I'll say thank you," she says, her voice dropping to an apologetic whisper, as she presses her hands together and bows in mock obsequiousness. "Thank you. Thank you so much." She laughs again and then grins mischievously. "I'm waiting for it."

As Chen reels off the inspirations, she stops on Kentucky Route Zero

As have we. It's closing on three years since we featured the game in **E**330, but part of that can be attributed to the time-consuming 2D animation that signifies protagonist Miriam's memories. We venture that the game's themes and wistful mood remind us a little of Studio Ghibli's Only Yesterday, in which a woman in her late 20s looks back upon her school years, though as Chen notes, Cloisters Interactive hardly has Ghibli's resources. It has been, she admits, a painstaking process. "It's frame by frame and if one shape is off, like on someone's mouth, then the entire thing has to go away. The 2D team worked super-hard just to get it right. And it's my fault. I'm kind of a perfectionist. I'm just like, 'Nope, that's not how I imagined her mouth, you've got to redo this mouth again.' We redid entire sequences [from scratch]."

The results so far suggest the effort has been worth it. And for a game about memory, one with semi-autobiographical elements at that, it was clearly important to Chen to get

this part in particular just right. "2D animation was a big part of my childhood. My mom was like Miriam — she was always working. So I spent a lot of time watching Disney classics. I'd just loop them." She smiles fondly. "That became almost symbolic of my childhood. And I think most people who watched classic Disney can probably relate to a nostalgic childhood memory through 2D animation."

That contrasts with the adult Miriam, who is rendered in a more realistic style, giving the sense of memories bleeding into the present day, as she finds connections to her past. Yet this Miriam is still expressive, using exaggerated, almost theatrical gestures to convey her feelings — a crucial element of *A Memoir Blue*'s wordless storytelling, with music also a key factor in establishing mood and emotion. Chen likens it to a stage performance, and feels the absence of dialogue encourages players to derive their own meaning from what's unfolding onscreen. "I feel like it gives a player more imagination, when they see something that isn't limited to what a narrator is saying or what a character is speaking. They can try to read the imagery and understand the characters' feelings by their facial expressions."

There is, of course, the small matter of what you *do* in *A Memoir Blue*. If it's not a game, how is the player involved? The comparisons Chen makes are instructive: as she reels off the inspirations behind the story's magical-realist elements, from Murakami's short stories to Alice In Wonderland, she stops on *Kentucky Route Zero*. "My goal is always to have each interaction to tell one sentence [of the story]," she says. Players will be able to explore scenes and click on objects, or they can focus on the story, which she says will make it clear to the player what they need to do to progress. Another influence is Vectorpark's tactile puzzle plaything *Windosill*. "Interaction-wise, that was a huge, huge reference point," she says. Good news for those who've played that game, and if you haven't, it's fair to say you can expect this nostalgic tale to be as entertaining and surprising as its director is to interview. ∎
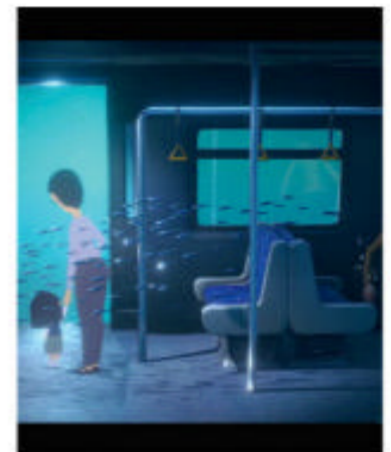
Herstory

A Memoir Blue was originally a thesis project for Chen's Master's degree at NYU. "In the beginning we were trying to do a kind of puzzle[-led] narrative game but I wanted to make something that had a unique feeling that didn't lock into the idea of a puzzle game." As the group brainstormed, they realised the others had almost completed their projects, which is why Chen introduced elements of her personal story to get things started. Annapurna subsequently signed the game after Cloisters Interactive produced a two-minute demo for Indiecade. "I always thought people would be like, 'What the hell is this?'" Chen says. "But when I met other devs at Indiecade, they said there are more and more games like this now."

TOP **Miriam is a highly successful swimmer, so this scenario probably isn't as concerning as it may appear.** ABOVE **Chen says the story has fewer autobiographical elements than it did at first.** "After we met Annapurna, I shaped the story [away from] my personal side, and more towards something that everybody could relate to," she says

TOP **When Chen first approached Annapurna, she didn't expect the publisher to be interested in her game.** "I just hoped I could talk to them," she recalls. ABOVE **The 2D animation is introduced by a newspaper image coming to life.** LEFT **Chen says some people might describe** A Memoir Blue **as a puzzle game, but that she hopes players click on objects simply because they interest them:** "If you open a door, it's more like you're choosing a path [than] solving an issue."
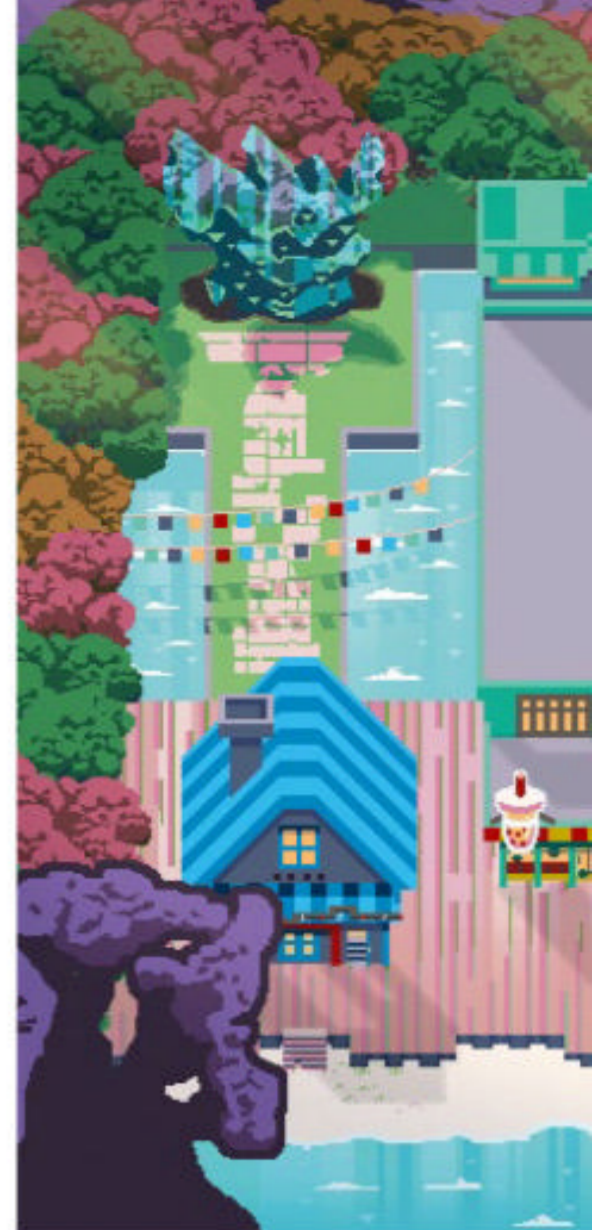
MIDAUTUMN

Exploring the Asian diaspora via a Hades-style Roguelike
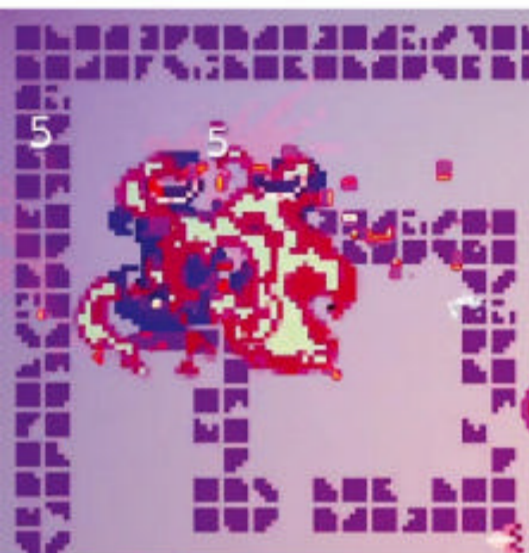
Even before its v1.0 release, it was abundantly clear *Hades* was going to have a significant impact on the Roguelike genre — all the more so when it launched from early access to rapturous acclaim. *Midautumn*'s project lead, **Sherveen Uduwana**, was keenly aware of the need to get ahead of the game(s) with his own narrative-driven Roguelike. "I have to work on this now, because in one or two years, there's going to be 30 other games on this concept," he says.

The influence of Supergiant's game is clear here, from the way dungeon rooms offer two possible exits, with the potential reward indicated above, to how death takes you back to a hub where you meet new characters or engage in fresh dialogue. Yet *Midautumn*'s top-down maps are rather more reminiscent of *The Binding Of Isaac*, while its chunky pixel art takes inspiration from *Hyper Light Drifter*.

Uduwana also cites narrative games such as *Night In The Woods* and *Butterfly Soup* as influences, the latter in particular holding special relevance since it also centres its story on the Asian immigrant experience. That term covers a wide range of experiences, since it can refer to people of South Asian or East Asian descent, depending on which side of the Atlantic you're on; Uduwana is of Sri Lankan descent but grew up in Vietnam and Singapore before moving to the US in 2013. "I had an entirely different layer of what it means to be in the Asian diaspora from an American context," he admits. "It makes it very hard for me to individually write a story that I feel rings true to a lot of people."

It's why he ultimately decided that *Midautumn* would have an East Asian focus, shaped by a team from similar backgrounds, which includes Sisi Jiang (developer of text adventure *Lionkiller* and writer on **Edge** favourite *Signs Of The Sojourner*) as narrative lead. This representation is reflected in the game's setting, the seaside community of Nambo Quay, which has a statue commemorating the Chinese railroad workers who founded the town, and in protagonist Robin Lam. A college graduate crashing at their grandmother's, Lam discovers they're the new guardian of a spirit world that is accessed via the basement, where they'll need the gifts of their ancestors to survive.

"We really liked the idea of encouraging players to play more aggressively"

These ancestral gifts can again be likened to *Hades'* boons to customise your builds for each run. However, *Midautumn*'s combat has a twist: your Lunar Staff must absorb enemies' Lunar Blood projectiles before you can attack. If the blood remains in your system for longer than five seconds or you get hit while it's still absorbed, though, you'll be cursed with Lunar Rot: while you can continue to attack, you take recoil damage each time. You can find an

The pixel art is fairly low-density, and while Uduwana is conscious it may not appeal to everyone, he's hoping it's balanced by the strength of the character portraits, as well as the narrative and gameplay

EDGE

Mythic guests

Given *Hades* offered a fresh spin on the Greek gods, you might assume *Midautumn* would mine the pantheon of Chinese mythology, though you certainly won't have met pirate seller Tsechoi or Confucian scholar Wenye, the first two ancestral spirits we encounter. Uduwana has clarified that these are all original characters that don't come from any pre-existing mythology, although they may borrow a few cultural tropes. "Ultimately, what we want to do is to allow ourselves to play these characters that feel embraced by Asian diasporic culture," he explains. "We don't want to be the game for people who want to know about Asian mythology. We want to be able to tell our own stories, and have the freedom to have our own characters."

During our session in *Midautumn*'s first biome, we're limited to traversing single square rooms. Development is still early, and there's plenty else to pay attention to on screen

item to purge the Rot, but facing a boss with more health than you in this condition makes for a one-sided affair.

While Uduwana concedes that's not a good outcome, the right build can turn things around. One gift, for example, revives you a single time with ten per cent of your health, while also converting any Lunar Rot in your body into an attack. "One of the things we're trying to improve upon now is that people who are very versed in Roguelikes and dungeon crawlers have built up the expectation that each bit of damage you take is very dangerous and to be avoided at all costs," he says. "We really like the idea of encouraging players to

play more aggressively and not being so hard [on themselves] about mistakes."

After a year in which there has been a spike in Asian hate crimes, linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, Uduwana hopes that *Midautumn* can offer an optimistic and inclusive experience for the East Asian community. He's also keen not to characterise the community's members as one unified monolith, with the game featuring characters that represent perspectives from immigrants born in mainland China, as well as those who have grown up with different values in the US. "It's absolutely a challenge," he says, "But it's something I'm very excited to do." ∎

FRANK AND DRAKE

Shelley and Stoker would be proud

You can almost picture a nervous creative, excitably babbling about their latest high-concept idea in front of a row of Netflix execs. "What if Frankenstein's monster and Dracula were flatmates in the present day? One's around during daylight hours, and the other only comes out at night. And get this: what if they never meet, but communicate with one another via Post-It notes?" With the streaming giant recently signing *Oxenfree* dev Night School Studios, and its keen recent interest in interactive storytelling, it's not hard to imagine seeing *Frank And Drake* on the New & Popular tab.

The story begins with Frank, who, beyond his height and broad shoulders, looks a far cry from Mary Shelley's pitiful monster. Traipsing home through graffiti-strewn alleyways with a sullen look on his face, it's clear he's got a lot on his mind. As well he might: as Appnormals' co-founder **Iñaki Díaz** puts it, "he's degrading and running out of life." Still, that doesn't mean he can avoid the household chores. Rather than tidy Drake's room, we head to the basement to fix up an exercise bike, and while there, notice that one of the neighbours has been stealing electricity. As the janitor, you have a choice whether to fix it or turn a blind eye: they've just had a new addition to the family, so perhaps we'll let this one go.

The mood is mournful, but just as Frank is about to hand over to Drake, having written up the day's events in his diary (the entries reflecting the choices we've made for him) and stuck a note on the fridge door, he opens a letter and a noxious orange gas leaks out, swiftly rendering him unconscious. And thus, after a slow start, we have the story's first cliffhanger. "Events will start developing quite fast after that," Diaz teases.

Both Frank *and* Drake have personal quests, in fact, around which they'll need to fulfil their fair share of the housework, over the course of one in-game week: a deadline that lends a sense of urgency to the story. That said, there are opportunities to linger:

befitting the epistolary nature of its influences, much of the narrative is told through journal entries and the pair's notes to one another, but there's plenty of background detail besides. There are flyers in the mailbox to leaf through, while Frank's thoughts spill out as he puts the week's groceries away. You can plug in a popcorn maker and watch letters gradually spit out through the nozzle, rearranging themselves. As Drake, meanwhile, you can complete a simple crossword puzzle — albeit via a bizarre control scheme which involves highlighting empty spaces with the mouse and tapping the keyboard to enter the answers.

But that weirdness is a good fit for the game's uncanny ambience, which extends to the way its characters have been animated.

"These are extraordinary characters trying to blend in, in an ordinary world"

The rotoscoping technique used here instantly reminds us of Richard Linklater's A Scanner Darkly, so it's no surprise when Diaz mentions it ("and, more recently, Loving Vincent") as a major influence. This was largely a pragmatic choice, it seems, albeit one that suits the story. "As indies, we always try to pick a few elements that can help in terms of visibility and awareness and make the game stand out," Diaz says. "But it makes sense with the premise that we're trying to sell — the fact that these are extraordinary characters trying to blend in, in an ordinary world."

That contrast of the otherworldly and the mundane proves alluring enough for us to persevere through a couple of (more amusing than frustrating) technical issues. Indeed, by the end we're already hooked — keen to see how this odd couple might work together to help one another, even without ever crossing paths. That slush pile's loss, then, is our gain: this is already a distinctive and unusual narrative adventure with bags of potential. ■

Walking stimulator

The most effective use of rotoscoping comes when you're in control. For the most part, the game uses familiar point-and-click inputs but occasionally you'll push the arrow keys to make the protagonists walk along: Frank is more of a stomper, while Drake's gait has a certain swagger. Diaz says it's designed to "immerse the player a little bit more in the action", and again there's a practical element involved: "It helps to realise the amount of frames you need to draw." It's also been built with streamers in mind, he says. "It means you can stop and talk about the game and then fulfil the animation when you're ready. That way you can be more of a participant in the dynamics and tempo of the narrative."

A bit rude to assign my free time to specific chores, isn't it? And by 'mess', he probably means 'human-made uber -chaos'

Very impolite

TOP **The walking sequences involve little more than pressing a button, but that simplicity allows you to focus on the animation.**
ABOVE **You have a few options for how to spend your time, and there are several incidental interactions besides.**
FAR LEFT **Drake's arrival prompts a change of typeface to a more elegant, cursive style.**
LEFT **The tasks you're set might be mundane at times, but they're enlivened by some evocative details**

BACKBEAT

The studio behind Hexagroove is back to funk you up

From tactical DJs to puzzle-led funk jams: Ichigoichie's follow-up to 2019's *Hexagroove* proves the studio knows a bit about fusion. "I'm into Casiopea and stuff like that, and my partner is a bit more into soul, like American Motown groups," creative director **David Ventura** says. The game might be built upon similar musical foundations to its predecessor, but it takes a very different approach: rather than working the crowd on your own, you need to work together as a group. "Not everybody can be doing solos all the time," Ventura adds, noting that collaboration is crucial when you're sharing the stage with up to three other people. "You need to not step on their toes."

Backbeat takes that last point rather literally. Set in the '90s, it follows Watts, a young woman to whom we're introduced as she sounds out the opening riff from Pearl Jam's Jeremy on her bass. Yet she soon has her musical horizons expanded, as she attends a gig by funk band The Mesatones. Before long, she's roped in keytar player Toshi, and the two find themselves making their way to a rehearsal space in her parents' house. Your job

is to steer them both there, moving step by step across the grid-based environment and turning to avoid bumping into obstacles. Get them there successfully and a four-beat counts them in as their actions are replayed as a sparse but catchy groove.

Then it's off to a video store to recruit drummer Josh, whose clumsy movements see him barrel forward until he hits something (or someone): something extra to bear in mind as you manoeuvre around a bar. The final piece of the puzzle is saxophonist Chaz, who you need to catch up with in the car park before he has the chance to drive off. To add an extra

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Collaboration is crucial when you're sharing the stage with up to three other people

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wrinkle, the barrier only goes up as he puts his coins in the meter, so you need to make a late break while sidestepping others walking to their vehicles. During the replay, Watts' laid-back strut in particular gives it the feel of a victory lap, as all four arrive together, sounding like a band for the first time.

If each puzzle is also a performance, with multiple ways to reach your destination — and the ability to rewind steps without penalty — it's one you can take your time to refine. The initial solution may come relatively easily, but completing a stage with style might take longer. Levels, Ventura says, are built from sound packs, with a core theme that has three or four variations that are cut up into clips: "Depending on which direction you take, there's a different variation played. So if you turn left, it's variation one; if you turn right

"The way the game is built, there's like a three-tiered grading system," Ventura says. "It's the same system that we have in *Hexagroove* where level one is clear the stage, level two is get an S-rank, and then level three is maximise the points"

EDGE
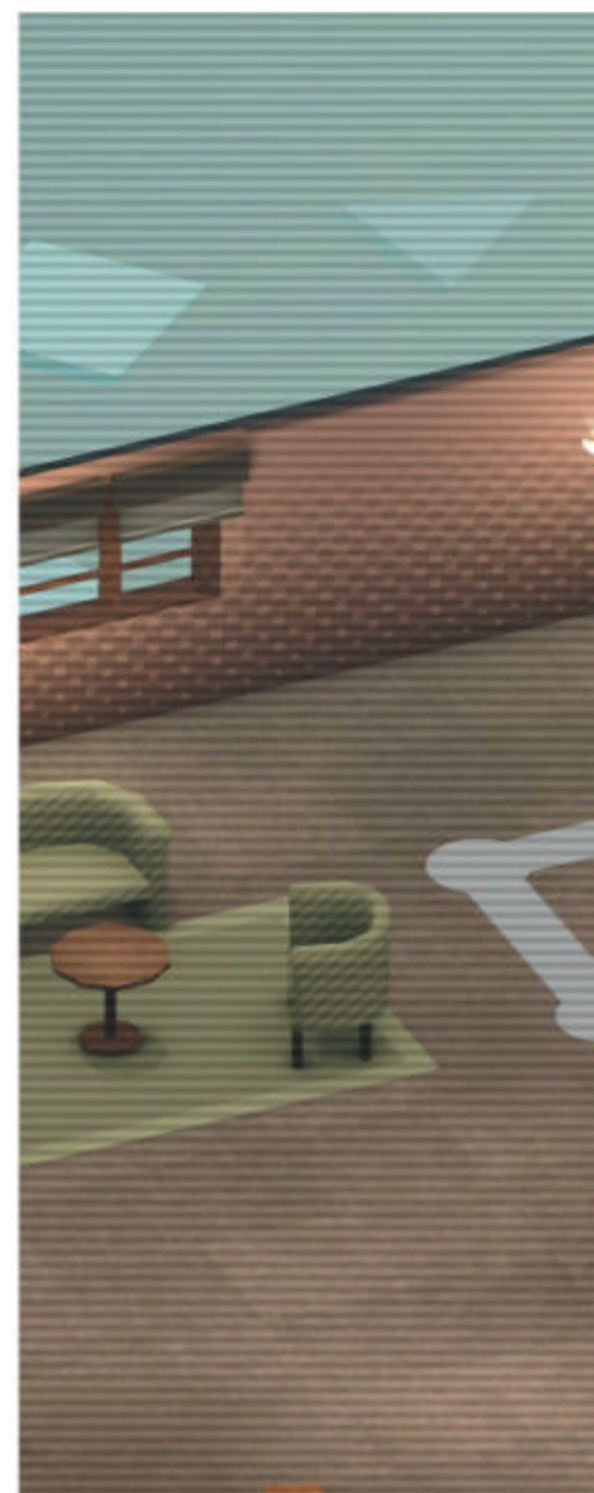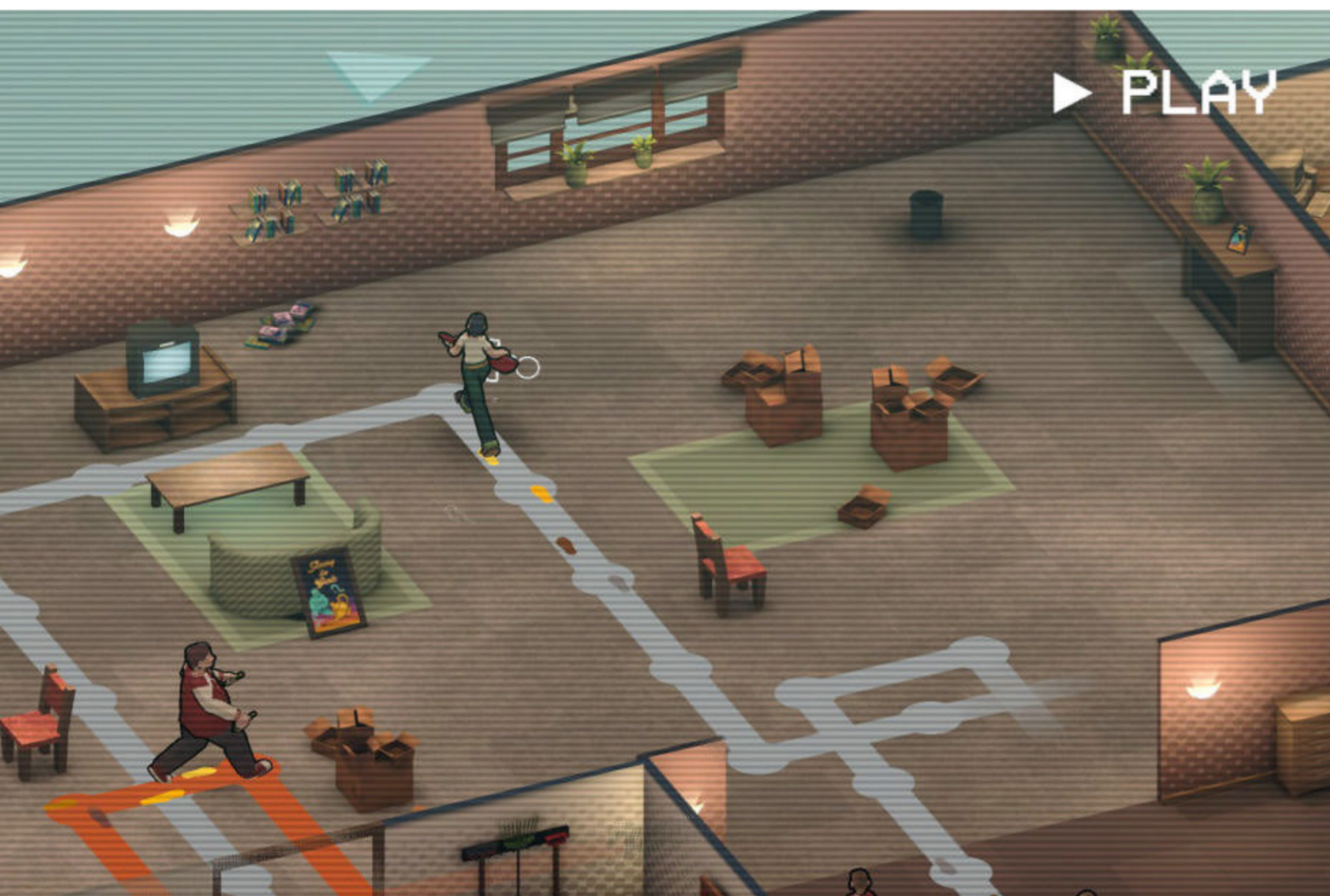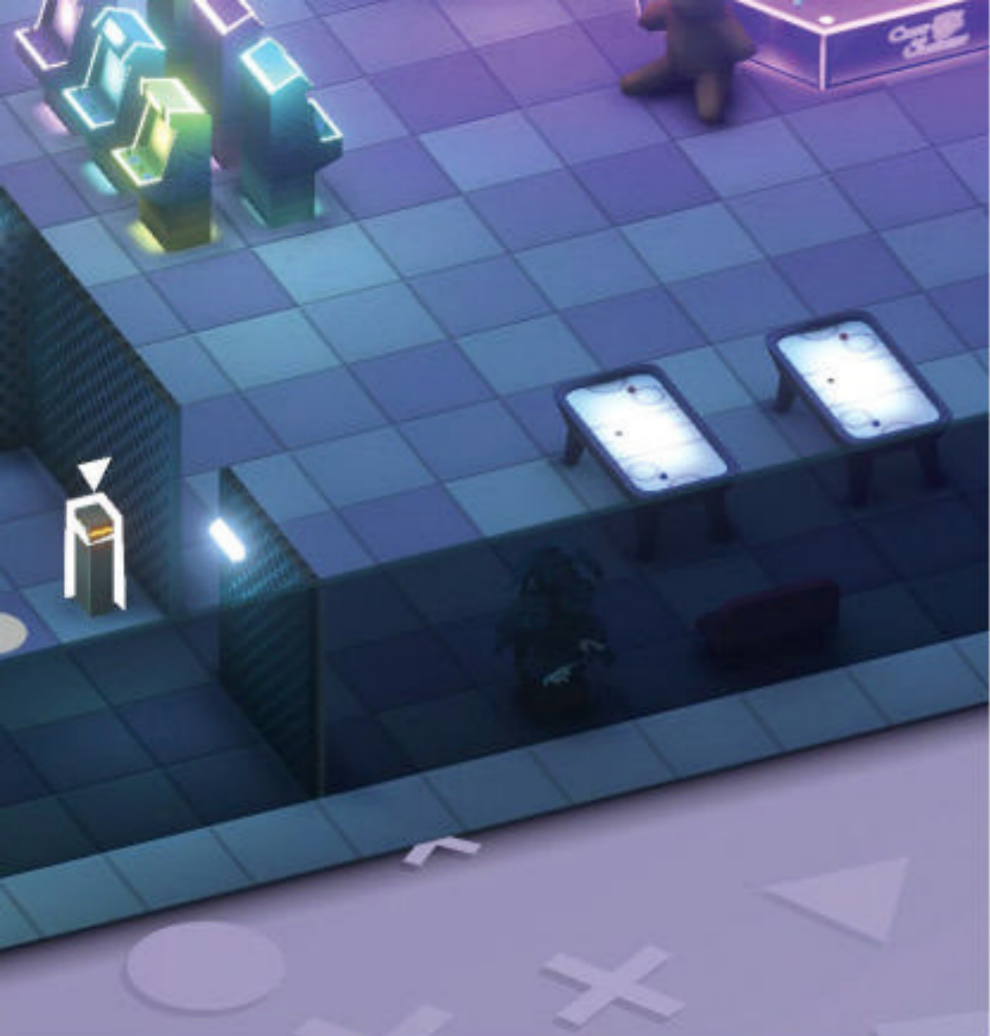
Funk power

Each band member has a super move that can help them bypass an obstacle or remove one from the path of another character. "The drummer can break down a wall, and the keyboardist gets on his knees like Pete Townsend and slides across the stage, letting him warp through [NPCs]," Ventura explains. Various other tricks are unlocked over time to help you maximise your score, and Ichigoichie is hoping to be able to include a feature where you can export videos of your puzzle solutions to share. "We would also like to build an online community, with a leaderboard of best solutions, but that's a bit outside the scope of what we're probably going to do in 1.0 unless we get some kind of external support."

TOP *Backbeat* still exists in its nascent form, Ventura says. "We have this 2D top-down version of the game that runs in a web browser and uses emoji," he says.
TOP RIGHT The story has taken inspiration from The Commitments, Ventura says. "It's a real depiction of being in a band, rather than everyone always being best friends and everything working out fine."
MAIN Even without changing the tone of your instruments, the playback should sound quite different for the various puzzle solutions

it's variation two. And it will change when you choose to pause. The vibe will be the same, but you can potentially produce many different songs." A Stagger meter helps with the remixing. Triangles appear on the timeline when you turn; the trick to getting a high score is to ensure there's little overlap by picking when to turn and when to rest for a bar: think of it as allowing one of your bandmates to take the lead, and it makes perfect sense.

"The audio technology is even stronger than [*Hexagroove*] in terms of what we can do with it," Ventura says; indeed, there are more ways to customise your band's sound beyond taking a different route to the finish. "We're

going to have a dynamic effect change that the player can choose and swap out, like distortion on the pedals or a different slap-bass style." It sounds more complicated than it is: just like learning an instrument, the quickest way to pick it up is to play it. And as you retrace your steps to aim for the elusive higher ranks, it becomes clear that this isn't so much composing or remixing, but *rehearsing*: it might be easy to play a gig, but producing a truly unforgettable show is another matter. Ichigoichie has already had a dry run in that regard, of course — and from what we've played so far, *Backbeat* has the swagger that could yet elevate it to indie stardom. ■

BATTLEFIELD 2042

Developer/publisher Electronic Arts (DICE) **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Origin** Sweden **Release** November 19

It's been an up and down month for EA's ambitious multiplayer shooter. *BF2042*'s third and final game type was belatedly unveiled: Hazard Zone is a squad-based mode in which teams of four compete to extract data drives from downed satellites. That came after a response to its online beta that could generously be described as 'mixed' – sufficient for the publisher to release a statement admitting that the build it had made available was months old. Having been postponed once already, could its launch be delayed again? We wouldn't bet against the above date having changed by the time you read this.

SOLAR ASH

Developer Heart Machine **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, PS4, PS5 **Origin** US **Release** December 2

We'd hoped to feature a review of E359's cover game in this issue, but found out just ahead of the official announcement that its release was being pushed back a few weeks – coincidentally, to the date E366 hits shelves. It's a reminder that the pandemic has affected smaller dev teams, too: the delay, Heart Machine says, is to allow for "polish and bug fixes".

SORRY WE'RE CLOSED

Developer/publisher À La Mode Games
Format PC **Origin** UK **Release** 2022

As a young woman in a demonic world, you need to stay alive long enough to find the cure for a fatal curse. With its glitchy apparitions, haunting score and low-poly style, the debut release from new two-person indie À La Mode Games has strong *Killer7* vibes – though the duo insist that they've never played Suda51's starkly rendered action adventure.

ENENRA

Developer/publisher Zahid Games
Format PC **Origin** UK **Release** TBA

Developed by Zaheed Ali Jeelani, a junior combat designer at Ninja Theory, this thirdperson hack-and-slash has strong echoes of *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, with its lithe cyber-ninja hero, futuristic Japanese setting and responsive, satisfying action. The game is playable now, too, thanks to Jeelani releasing in-progress builds (bit.ly/enenragame).

THE INVINCIBLE

Developer/publisher Starward Industries
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Origin** Poland **Release** 2022

Polish studio Starward Industries is behind this adaptation of countryman Stanisław Lem's science-fiction novel, in which a group of astronauts search a bleak planet for the crew of a crashed ship. Those familiar with the source material might wonder exactly how it will handle combat, but the retro-futuristic aesthetic already looks irresistible.

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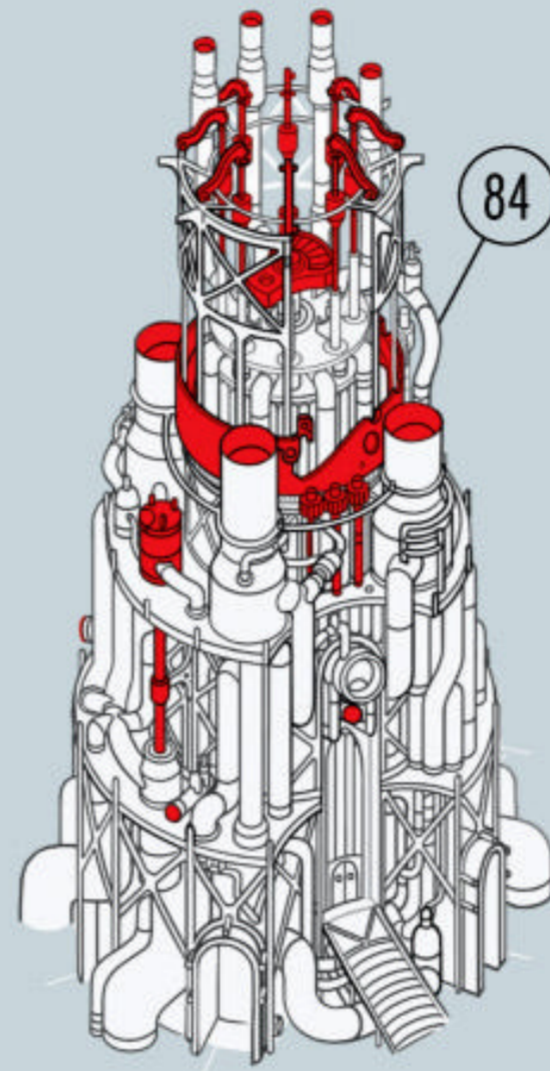
CAT POWER

Four legs better: how
Stray's feline star makes
BlueTwelve's debut an urban
adventure like no other

By Chris Schilling

E yes wide, ears perked and tail swaying gently, a small cat pads through the drizzly cobblestone streets of Midtown. And as his paws splash softly through scattered puddles reflecting the neon signs on the buildings that loom over him on both sides, we're reminded that BlueTwelve's co-founders know plenty about crafting beguiling worlds.

Vivien Mermet-Guyenet – a level artist on *ZombiU* – and former Ubisoft Montréal environment and lighting artist Colas Koola are obviously accustomed to creating the kind of virtual spaces that are designed to be lingered in and gawped at. There are details to draw the eye at every turn, and an atmosphere so thick you can almost smell it. That adds up to a place that feels startlingly real, even as the city's other inhabitants make clear we're in the realms of speculative fiction. Sure, there are plenty of familiar elements here, the kind of sights and sounds we've seen and heard in other urban dystopias. But even these are rejuvenated, this inquisitive lead transforming this space into somewhere that feels thrillingly new. Dangerous, too. You know what they say about curiosity, after all. ▶

There may be no imminent threat, but this world thrums with menace from the off. That's partly because our demo starts in a dark, litter-strewn alley, with thin sodium lamps outside shuttered shops the only sources of light. But it's also because you're instantly made to feel vulnerable. We're a short way into the game, and our four-legged hero has fallen into this place, separated from family and friends as he seeks an escape route. Limping gingerly, unable to put any real weight on his left hind leg, he mewls in a way that instantly arouses our pity. He trots awkwardly on, past strewn bin bags and an old bike that looks like it's been lying there for some time, a chain-link fence blocking his path. Turning his gaze upwards prompts the appearance of a tiny context-sensitive button prompt. With a tap of the Cross button, he hops up onto a wheelie bin, and then again onto the awning above it. Looking ahead, he doesn't notice the ominous red light of a CCTV camera, as it turns slowly to keep an eye on this curious interloper. Two more taps, and he's back down to street level, now able to walk unhindered. A little way ahead are two more red lights: as the cat approaches, there's a faint chittering sound, and two small, strange creatures scuttle out of sight.

"Obviously this place is supposed to be at least unwelcoming," producer **Swann Martin-Raget** tells us, before turning his attention to a nearby sign. "This is why we also developed an alphabet for the whole language for the game – to have players really feel that they don't understand this place and they don't get all the codes of this environment." Soon after, we see another notice, though this one's a little more clear: several letters on an extinguished neon sign suddenly spark back to life, spelling out 'HELP', with two arrows pointing to the right. That happens to be past an area that's flooded – yet that's no problem for the cat, who nimbly leaps across barrels onto aircon units and then pipes to make the crossing without getting his paws wet. Then it's through a small hole where another chain-link fence has been pulled back, and into another side-street where an arrangement of nine flickering TV screens beckons: 'Follow me'. ▶

MAIN **"Controlling the cat raised some interesting camera challenges,"** Martin-Raget says.
LEFT **The game also features a pseudo-firstperson camera, letting you look around from the top of the cat's head.**
FAR LEFT **Martin-Raget: "The setting is going to make more and more sense as you progress"**

PET PROJECT

Speaking on behalf of BlueTwelve's founders, Martin-Raget explains that *Stray* was only a few "visual scenes" when Annapurna Interactive came on board – though even at that early stage, the two had a strong idea of what the game was going to be. "The art direction was quite clear in their minds, and they had a few prototypes of the cat being able to jump on air-con [units]." The backpack and B-12 were also in place when it was still known as HK Project. Funding was confirmed in April 2017, while by the end of that year (two years after the idea had first been dreamed up) the team had grown to five. If anything, the scope of the game has narrowed since then, he says: "When Viv and Koola started, they were extremely enthusiastic about all the features that they could develop, but they realised that for a lot of things to be polished enough for them to be *interesting* enough would take a lot of time and effort. So we [focused] more on the things that we felt were most important."

"In the first part of the game, you're kind of feeling this presence that is following you along the way," Martin-Raget continues. "We want to have this impression that you're being watched very closely as you progress." We're barely a few minutes in and we're almost tempted to tell him to stop, so keen are we to discover things at our own pace. At the same time, we're intrigued to find out who – or what – is sending us these messages. And, for that matter, why. But already the cat has squeezed through a vent into a lighter area, overgrown with creeping plants. The spinning blades of a fan block the way forward, but nearby is a small bucket. The cat trots over and grabs the handle in his mouth, scampering back up to the pipe and dropping it down the ramp. Sure enough, it lodges in place, halting the fan and letting him pass by safely. Into the next room, and a glass roof becomes the latest obstacle. Above it is a ledge, upon which a paint pot is tantalisingly positioned, almost begging to be nonchalantly nudged off with a dismissive swipe. There's a loud crash, and a precipitous leap downward, negotiated with casual ease: clearly that back paw isn't hurting any more.

The camera briefly shifts to a fixed perspective as he lands on an empty bunk bed. Another 'follow me' sign is projected onto a nearby wall; another flickering TV guides us through a beaded curtain before we duck through a boarded-up doorway, and hop into a bucket hanging off the side of a ledge, a counterweight rising as this makeshift lift carries the cat back down to street level once more. More signs suddenly spark to life, more bug-like critters scuttle away, the cat now silhouetted against a sickly green strip-light glare. Then, suddenly, a jolt, a shriek, and an arched spring backward as a pile of electronic parts moves abruptly, revealing itself to be a dying robot with one arm and no legs, its screen-face illuminating as its single hand reaches out desperately towards you before it collapses and shuts down for good. As our pulse returns to normal, Martin-Raget guides the cat into ▶

an empty oil barrel and rolls it over to a wheelie bin to leap up to higher ground. We're reminded of the business with all the pallets and stepladders in *The Last Of Us*, but everything here feels lighter, brisker and more enjoyable.

BlueTwelve's approach to navigating this world reminds us, in fact, of another Naughty Dog game – or, more specifically, a term used by Neil Druckmann to describe it. "The term we use is 'wide linear'," he said of *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*. "It's not open world, because we wanted to tell a very specific story, with very specific tension." *Stray*'s opening is similarly heavily authored; indeed, there is a hint of Nathan Drake in the platforming here, albeit without so much of the crumbling handholds and flimsy masonry. Any individual jump can be made with even more confidence: that tiny context-sensitive prompt lets you know the cat will land safely. You merely need aim the camera in the right direction, and wait a split-second as he bends his back legs to propel himself up or down (the latter also accompanied by the barest hesitation as he looks at his intended landing spot).

It's not *really* a platformer, in other words. "That's correct, yes," Martin-Raget says. "We really didn't want to have that kind of challenge because we found that being a cat really implies that every jump is super-smooth and calculated, that you're jumping your way around there very easily. And so these kind of controls can help us do that and make you feel that you're really fluid around the environments. If you can imagine a [traditional] platforming challenge where you have to control your jump and missing very often that wouldn't be very [true to life]." There will, he says, be a few misses; cats tend to land on their feet, but anyone who's spent more than five minutes on the Internet will know they don't always judge their leaps to perfection. "But the rest are more fluid," Martin-Raget grins.

That whole sequence takes no more than six or seven minutes of game time. But having grounded us in this world, *Stray*'s next area lets us off the leash a little. Skipping past a key narrative moment, Martin-Raget leads us towards an area simply titled Slums, where the 'wide' part has been expanded to the point that 'linear' no longer applies. "We also have these bubbles that are way more of an open world kind of thing," the producer says. *Stray* may not be an open world in the classic sense – given that its setting has been heavily inspired by Kowloon Walled City, you'd expect a few boundaries – but there are areas where the pace slows, and you can roam around more freely.

And you're no longer alone. The cat now has the backpack you can see on this issue's cover, which contains a little drone: Operating System Beta 12, or B-12 for short. "This is a character that has the same goal as you, of leaving the city," Martin-Raget says. "You're going to learn more about his background as well and his nature, too. His role is really to expand the abilities of the cat." In the main, at this stage, that amounts to enabling you to communicate with the robots that populate the city. They're vaguely humanoid in appearance, albeit with monitors for heads, emoji-like faces lending them extra character. How the cat can understand the text messages flashed up by B-12 isn't entirely explained, but with Martin-Raget keeping his powder dry when it comes to *Stray*'s plot, we let that one go for now.

Not least because there are other things to think about. One droid, known as The Guardian, has told us to talk to another called Momo in a tall orange building: so far, this is the only lead we have. Yet there's no real urgency; instead, the player is afforded the time to potter about, and, well, do cat things. A row of empty bottles is swiftly toppled. Nearby, a robot is lying on a thin mattress; a press of Triangle and the cat curls up on the ▶

THERE IS A HINT OF NATHAN DRAKE IN THE PLATFORMING HERE, ALBEIT WITHOUT THE CRUMBLING HANDHOLDS
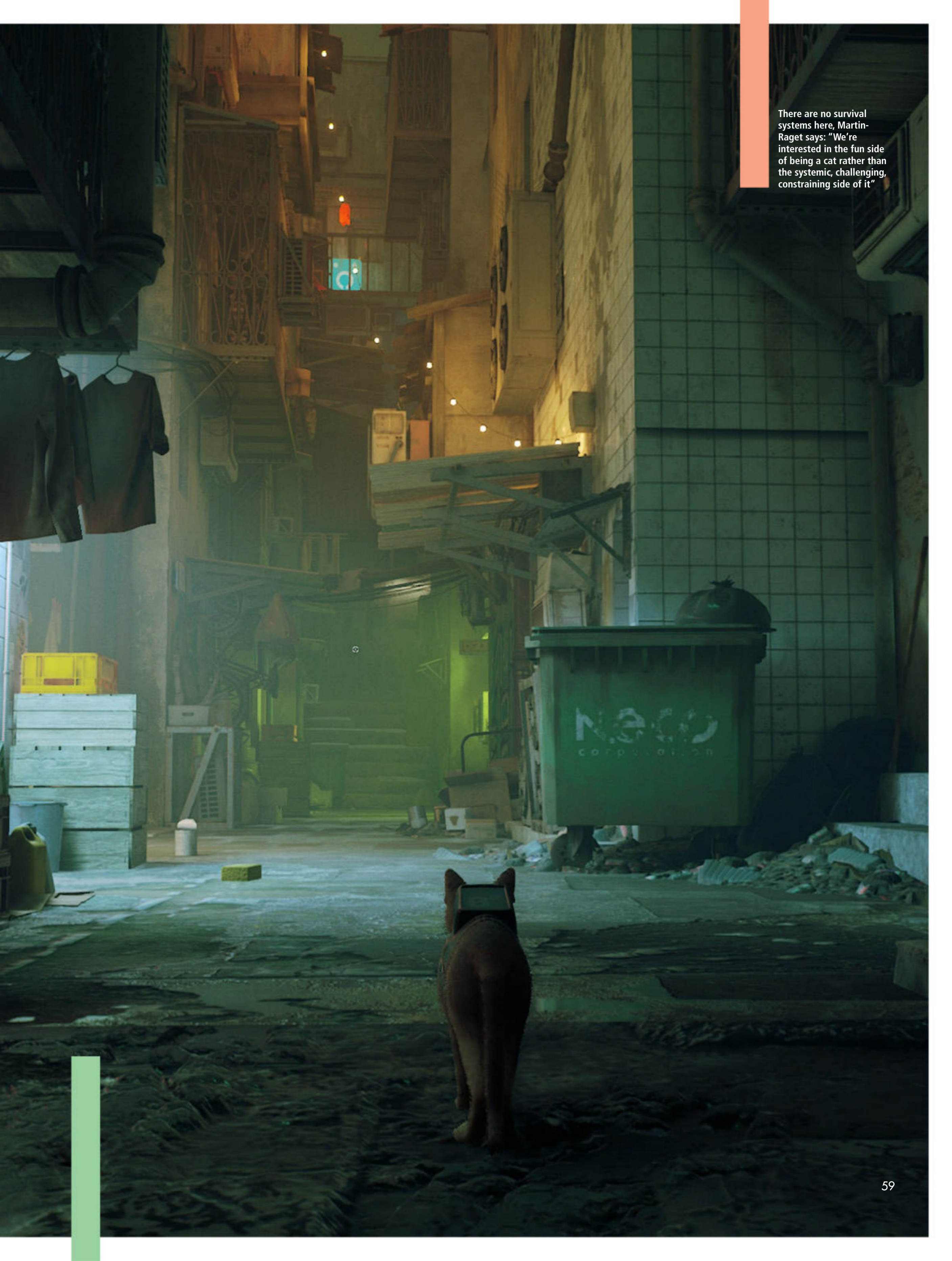
MAIN **'Meet' is a fine choice of verb for the robots you want to interact with: although B-12 helps you understand them, 'talk' wouldn't be quite right.**
ABOVE **There's something sad – and not a little disturbing – about the way robots have adopted human-like roles (and rules).**
RIGHT **Evocative lighting gives texture to urban midtown scenes**

"THE INTERNET WAS MADE FOR CAT PICTURES AND VIDEOS, SO WE DO HAVE A *LOT* TO WORK FROM"

pillows next to it. On the next corrugated rooftop over is a makeshift living room, with old rugs placed over a worn piece of lino. There's a sofa that practically demands to be clawed, and Martin-Raget duly obliges, squeezing the triggers alternately to let the cat enjoy a good scratch. Then he hops up onto the coffee table, pinging an empty beer can off the roof, before jabbing at a remote control to turn the tiny TV set on. And yes, you can change the channel.

As anyone who's ever owned a cat will be aware, this is what cats do. The movement and behaviour of *Stray*'s furry lead feels authentic in a way that you almost begin to take for granted. That, Martin-Raget says, is down to the time-consuming process of ensuring total consistency, such that the illusion is never broken. "We're all big cat lovers and we do see the little glitches or unrealistic things in animation," he says, tutting at the slightest of stutters. "It's kind of a whole-team effort to try to make that as realistic as possible. Which is not easy, for sure." Amusing as it is to think of a cat with ping-pong balls attached to it, no motion-capture sessions have been involved; instead, the team has studied "gigabytes and gigabytes" of reference material. "The helpful thing is that it looks like the Internet was made for posting cat pictures and videos, so we do have a *lot* to work from," Martin-Raget laughs. Later, he'll show us "the main artwork" for the game's hero – which turns out to be a photo of a ginger cat. "This is actually Viv and Koola's cat," he says. "As you can see, it has a very noble look. It's called Murtaugh." (The in-game cat doesn't have a name – or at least not one that *Stray*'s producer is prepared to reveal – so for convenience's sake we'll stick with that from here.)

The Lethal Weapon reference doesn't feel entirely apropos in a demo with no combat, although Martin-Raget says you will eventually find a way to take direct action against the game's antagonists, the

Zurks. Yes, those critters from the intro return, and this time there's a lot more of them. Zurk areas are marked by bulbous orange growths and walls draped in strange organic matter, resembling nothing so much as thick strings of melted cheese dangling from a slice of pizza. Here, unarmed, we have to "play around with them a bit", in Martin-Raget's terms. Murtaugh first attracts their attention, luring them towards him, before crossing a narrow beam over to where they were before. Then comes another swarm, which can be avoided by leaping up to a girder, precariously suspended, that creaks unsettlingly as it takes Murtaugh's weight. B-12 can hack a gate to pen them in, but as they gather up against the fence like a horde of tiny zombies, you get a sense that they can't be contained indefinitely.

These are fraught moments, and worse is to come, as we leap forward to another more linear section, and what amounts to an action set-piece. "We don't want the game to be too hard, like a *Dark Souls* level of difficulty, Martin-Raget says. "But we do want to have fast-paced action sections to improve the rhythm of the adventure." Ominously titled Dead End, this next section takes place in an open sewer, with large pipes through which the Zurks pour in numbers, as Murtaugh nimbly dodges left and right, leading them up a short flight of steps before scampering back down the other side and through a hole. Leaping down, he lands on a trolley cart that barrels downhill, running over clusters of Zurks. "You will be able to fight back at some points, which an interesting progression on the gameplay. In the first part of the game you're really vulnerable, but a bit later in the game it's a bit more fair, in terms of [giving you] a fighting chance." Those sequences, he says, should be as cathartic for the player as for the studio's founders. "Koola and Viv lived through a bedbug invasion at one point, so being able to fight against Zurks was kind of a revenge for them as well." ▶

HUD NOR HAIR

There's almost nothing to obstruct your view of the city, with those tiny context-sensitive button prompts just about the only interface you see outside message pop-ups from B-12.

"It was definitely an intention from Viv and Koola to have a minimal UI and try to have that as much integrated in the game as possible," Martin-Raget tells us. At the same time, BlueTwelve is keen for players not to get lost during the more linear, story-focused stages. "We use a lot of level art clues, some specific lighting and specific textures that help guide you around," he says, though in the main they'll be subtler than those flashing signs and flickering TV sets. Even when you've more room to roam and your objective is less urgent, you can call B-12, who will remind you of where you're supposed to head next.

The robots – or at least the ones we've seen so far – are a friendly bunch. Some are too preoccupied to respond to your presence, but others are more welcoming

IN DESIGN, IT ALLOWS FOR A GREATER EMPHASIS ON VERTICALITY: CATS ARE NATURAL CLIMBERS, AFTER ALL

It's an exhilarating change of pace before things slow down once more, and we visit a stage that serves as the perfect answer to our next question: how does the decision to have a feline protagonist change how a studio approaches building a game world? From a design standpoint, Martin-Raget says, it allows for a greater emphasis on verticality: cats are natural climbers, after all, and so it's no surprise that Murtaugh soon finds himself navigating a village built around a colossal tree, the exit close to the top. Yet this is just a relatively small part of a world that the producer says was created with a view to underlining "the contrast between the cat being alive, fragile and organic, and the environment, which is cold, dead and very mechanical. This is why having robots inhabiting the city makes sense, and this is why you don't encounter a lot of living things."

Even so, these droids exhibit very human-like behaviours. Earlier, we see robots doing odd jobs, tossing paint cans to one another across rooftops. This huge, elaborate treehouse, meanwhile, decorated with parabolas of loosely hung string lights, reminds us of Pascal's village in *Nier: Automata*. Some robots are huddled inside blankets, as if insulating themselves against the cold. B-12 flashes up a message from a machine called Gérard, who doesn't want to be interrupted while he's practising transcendental meditation. Down on the ground, Murtaugh scampers around the feet of a pair of robot gardeners, tending to shoots that have sprouted between piles of human detritus: cans, white goods, plastic chairs, shopping trolleys.

Then we're off to the busy streets of Midtown where it's even more apparent that these machines have picked up both our habits and social structures. A robot Martin-Raget refers to as "grandma" busies herself making clothes out of cables. In bars and restaurants, customers are served with oil and pressurised air. "We try to play with the fact that they are machines and that they don't necessarily understand all the humans' codes perfectly," the producer explains. "They have this idea of humans and what

they were doing, so we try to use that to build stories that are interesting to explore." Some, he says, are more sane than others, who have become rather detached from reality. "That makes for some colourful and memorable characters for you to encounter."

The decision to populate the city with robots was initially a practical choice. With not just its founders but several other staff having experience of creating triple-A games at Ubisoft, the studio's plans were ambitious. But it simply wasn't pragmatic to have a cast of human characters. "Viv did try a bit at the start, but it was extremely time-consuming, very difficult to pull off, and they were usually not really satisfied with the results," Martin-Raget says. Still, the shift has paid off handsomely, helping to give the city its own identity, while allowing the developers to craft an extensive backstory of how this robot society came to be. Thorough explorers can dig into this in more detail: hidden around the environments are places that will trigger B-12's memories. "They will remember bits about the place and what it used to be. Were there humans before? Was there a meaning to this place? What actually happened? All this will unfold as you explore the levels."

This side objective provides an extra incentive to truly inhabit the role of an animal that's hardwired to be nosy. Then again, even with the low-slung camera lending this place an unsettlingly imposing ambience, the title feels less a description of its star and more an instruction to its players: if you don't meet a new character or find one of B-12's memories among these corrugated rooftops and rain-slicked alleys, there will usually be some kind of delightful feline activity to partake in – even if it's simply another scratching post or place to lie down. And Murtaugh himself is simply a joy to watch; without question, one of the most convincing in-game animals we've ever seen. If you're a cat person, then, your first encounter with *Stray* will probably be love at first sight. And if you aren't yet, there's a good chance you will be before this captivating adventure is over. ■

FRAME PERFECT

A lot of development time has been invested in the camera, and it shows: bearing in mind *Stray*'s protagonist, we keep a watchful eye for any moments when the action is unclear. After a while we realise we've stopped looking: during our demo, at least, it doesn't put a foot wrong. "There's a whole range in people's imagination of what the cat can actually do," Martin-Raget says. "Some players are really down-to-earth and don't want to jump on anything, and some players imagine that they can jump on the leaves of a tree to try to reach something. So we're trying to find a good balance of realistic behaviour and [making it] fun and easy to roam around." Having the camera so close to the ground emphasises the scale of the place, while encouraging the developer to tell more of the story through environmental detail. "With a human [character] you could just be walking through the streets and kind of ignoring everything. Being a cat, you're really close to the action and to the detail, and you have to find your way by observing really closely."
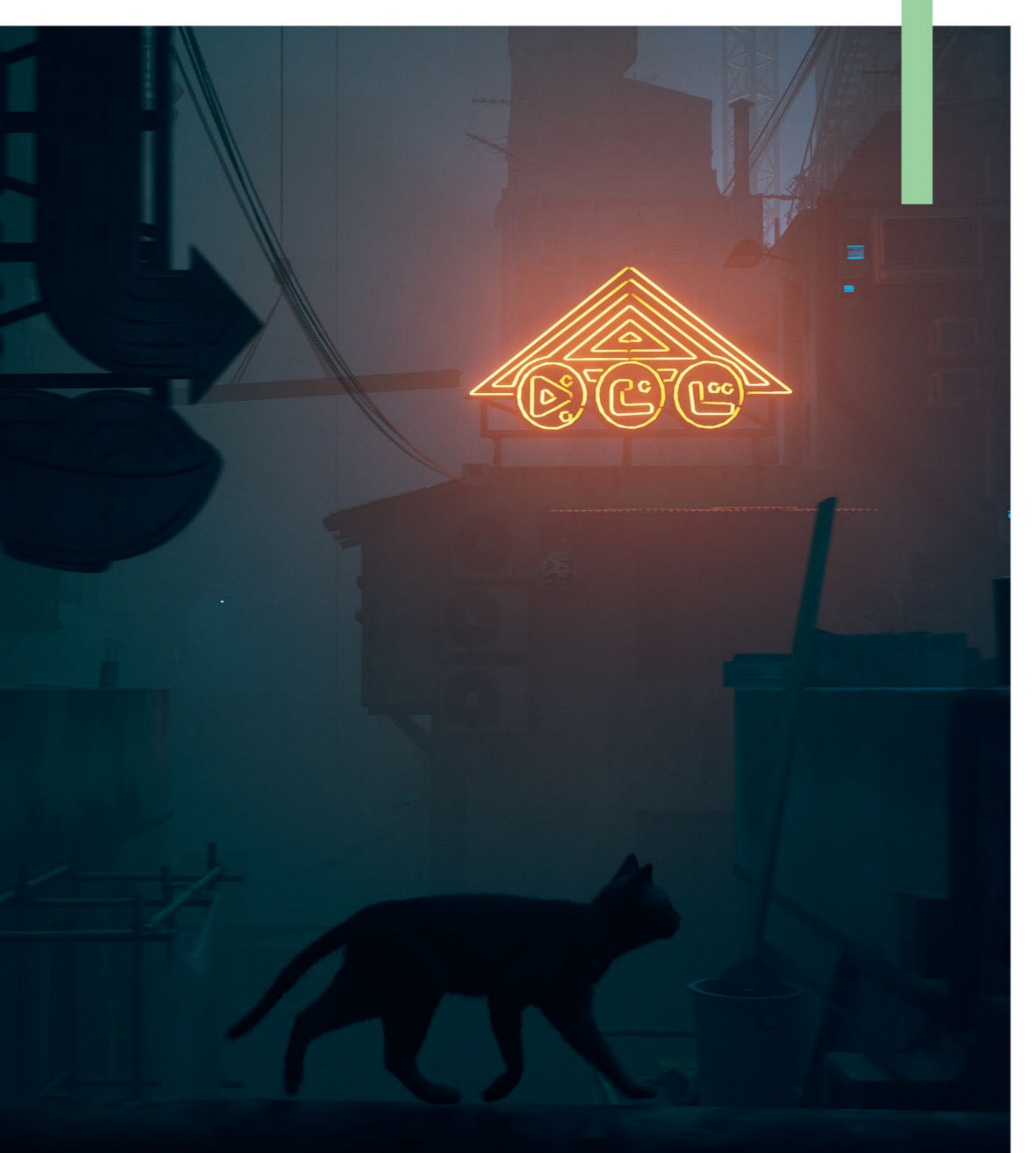
Currently there's no Photo
Mode in *Stray*, which may
come as a disappointment,
although its often-invisible
UI means you can capture
beautiful images regardless

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COMPUTER SPACE
Developer/manufacturer Nutting Associates **Format** Coin-op **Release** 1971

PONG
Developer/manufacturer Atari **Format** Coin-op **Release** 1972

TANK
Developer/manufacturer Kee Games **Format** Coin-op **Release** 1974

BREAKOUT
Developer/manufacturer Atari **Format** Coin-op **Release** 1976

ATARI VCS
Manufacturer Atari **Release** 1977

PIZZA TIME THEATER
Founded 1977

SAC-I
Manufacturer Sente **Format** Coin-op **Release** 1984

The origins of the videogame industry,
according to the man with the plan

BY PAUL DRURY
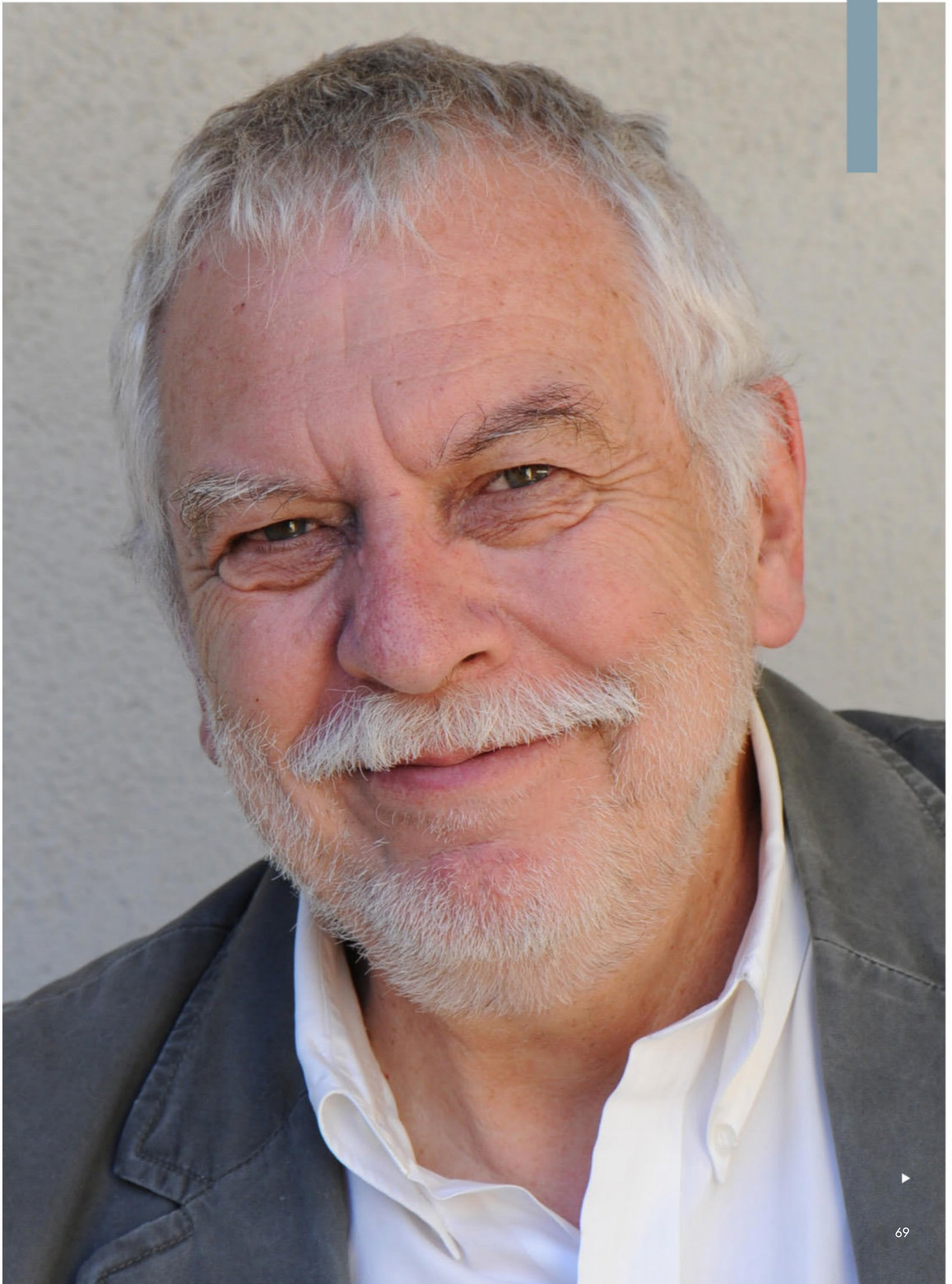
Who would play you in the movie of your life? For Atari founder **Nolan Bushnell**, it's not an academic question. "I'd like Adam Driver," he says, clearly finding the whole notion amusing. "There's been talk of making a film [of my life] for a long time, and it's still flopping about. I saw a screenplay and it was pretty accurate… and it wasn't all pink bunny rabbits. I'd like it to be made, but both movies about Steve Jobs were crap and that put the kibosh on films about Silicon Valley entrepreneurs."

If the Apple founder is worthy of two biopics, Bushnell is surely deserving of his own. After all, he produced the first commercially sold coin-op videogame, *Computer Space*, in 1971, and the colossus that emerged from it — Atari — is credited as being the fastest-growing company in US history.

Atari dominated the arcade business it created, with early hits such as *Pong* and *Tank*, before moving into the home market with the all-conquering Atari VCS console. Bushnell sold out to Warner in 1976 for $28 million (approx £135m in 2021 terms), using some of the earnings to keep control of the Pizza Time Theater restaurant business he'd recently launched.

"I was pretty good at selling," he smiles. "I don't know where I got it from. I suppose I've always been good with the spoken word. I'm a great bullshitter, but that's OK. Yes, I was surprised how quickly Atari grew but there's a saying that good luck happens to the prepared. I think I was surprisingly prepared for the chaos rapid growth brings. When you get used to a certain level of chaos, you're not flummoxed by it."

Bushnell stayed with Atari after the Warner takeover, parting ways several years later after a very public falling-out, and has been involved with a succession of game and tech companies ever since. He even has a law named after himself: Bushnell's Law, which states that a good videogame should be 'easy to learn, difficult to master'.

"I've said a lot of quotable things. A good saying is like a line of poetry, and I

"IF YOU KNEW ABOUT NEWTON'S LAW, IT MADE TOTAL SENSE, BUT IF YOU WERE A TRUCK DRIVER, IT WAS BAFFLING"

Since it was a new concept in arcade gaming, *Computer Space* needed some explaining. Its relative complexity held it back from becoming a monster hit in 1971

like the efficiency of good poetry, distilling thoughts and images to their essence — a lot of knowledge in very few words." With this in mind, let's dig into seven key stanzas of Bushnell's life in the videogame business to date.

COMPUTER SPACE
Developer/manufacturer Nutting Associates **Format** Coin-op **Release** 1971

You have to go back to when I first saw [pioneering PDP-1 game] *Spacewar!* in the labs at the University Of Utah, where I started studying in 1964. That summer, I had been managing the Lagoon Amusement Park and had 150 kids working for me when I was 21 years old. I knew how the coin-op business worked and I knew if I put a coin slot on *Spacewar!* I'd make money. But divide 25 cents for three minutes' play into $250,000, which is what the [PDP-1] computer cost, and the math doesn't work. I filed it away and thought one day the costs might come down to make this a reality. And they did.

Around 1969, two distinct things happened. When you're an engineer on the lab bench you get these free magazines that hawk various technical wares, and there was an advert for a minicomputer for $5,000, which was just remarkable. It was a Data General Nova 800. They even had a stripped-down version, without some of the peripherals, for $3,000. I thought, 'Ah,

that's kind of interesting'. At the same time semiconductor chips, which usually cost about $2.50 each, suddenly plummeted to 25c each. Those were the triggers that started me researching how I could do this.

Computer Space was a big project and I knew I needed help. Ted [Dabney – colleague at Ampex and co-founder of Atari] had a lot of skills and was a very good analogue engineer. I was good at digital and could repair televisions but we needed sound circuits, power supplies... When it came to actually building the cabinet and putting everything together, that was Ted. He took all that hoo-ha off my back.

If you're building something new, the fundamental architecture comes first. How am I going to make these things happen? What are the restraints I need to build in so it's not too expensive and it's not a fool's errand? For example, all the [computer] games up until then used vector displays, which were not commercial products. The cheapest one was like $30,000, so that's a nonstarter. I knew I had to use a regular TV, which I can buy for $99, so the game had to use a raster display. Finance drove the technology there!

We made *Computer Space* a singleplayer game because there was a known market [for that] from the electromechanical games in the arcade. There wasn't an established market for twoplayer games, and the nature of the circuitry meant that trying to get two rocket ships on screen would double a section of the cost. I was still wary about how much this would end up costing – I wanted to cut corners and have the first game we made to be cheap. Understand, I was a total failure there. I hadn't thought of doing something as simple as *Pong*! I've often wondered how I could've been so goddamn blind.

Computer Space was far more complicated, and it was all to do with Newton's Second Law: a body stays in motion until a power is exerted in another direction. The rocket ship would continue to move until you turned round and applied thrust in the opposite direction. If you knew about Newton's Law, that made total sense, but if you were a truck driver drinking a beer, it was baffling.

The original *Pong* hardware was made with a lot of off-the-shelf parts, including a consumer TV set for its display rather than a dedicated monitor. In comparison to the futuristic-looking *Computer Space*, a selling point here was the "low-key cabinet"

Was *Computer Space* a commercial failure? Failure is a judgement call, and as an engineer I prefer to put numbers on it. Chicago Coin's [electromechanical coin-op] *Speedway* was a big hit around that time and sold about 12,000 units; *Computer Space* sold about 3,000, so it was less of a hit. But I was a farm boy from Utah, and all of a sudden I'd developed a game that generated $3 million in sales. I was patting myself on the back all the way to the bank – and it gave me enough money to start Atari.

PONG

Developer/manufacturer Atari **Format** Coin-op **Release** 1972

I actually had a whole list of games I thought were possible, and ping pong was just one of them. One thing was pivotal, though. I went to the Magnavox Caravan [an event showcasing the new Magnavox Odyssey game console] and saw their tennis game. The graphics were fuzzy, there was no sound or score, and I thought, 'What a ▶

piece of crap'. But I looked around and people were having fun with it.

I needed a project for Al [Alcorn – Atari's first engineer] so I literally said, 'I want a paddle either side and a ball going back and forth, and when it hits the paddle... *pong*!' We both viewed it as an exercise, something to help Al learn. I still had my complexity hat on!

When we segmented the paddle – so that if the ball hit the upper corner it would bounce differently to if it hit the middle of the paddle – that gave the player the ability to play offense, not just defence. The original paddle design just had the usual 'angle incidence equals angle reflection', meaning you can only play defence. That's boring. The minute we put that 'angularisation' in there, we were staying after work to play the damn game!

I wasn't there the first night we put it on test at Andy Capp's Tavern. I was on a plane to Chicago with a [*Pong*] prototype. When we set up Atari, we had no money and no factory, so the idea was we would be the design shop for the big guys, available for hire. We had a contract with Bally for a game and I liked *Pong* so I thought maybe I'd offer them that and fulfil our contract. They were paying us $25,000 a month, which was a lot of money in those days. I'd presented it to Bally, who had just bought out Midway, and they weren't so sure, so I went to see the guys at Williams the next day and they were the same, kind of iffy about it. I was all ready to get on the plane home, not knowing if they were going to go for *Pong* or not, and then I talked to Al. He told me how much the game had been earning — how the cashbox had totally filled up. On the plane, I was doing calculation after calculation and decided we could build these things ourselves. I worked out we had enough money to build 13 machines and even if we couldn't sell them, based on the earnings, we could put them out there ourselves and use that for cashflow.

The next week I phoned Bally and said Williams doesn't want it and then I phoned Williams and said Bally doesn't want it — so they both turned it down. It was ours. We actually built 12, because 13 is unlucky. We built about 35,000 in the end. We renamed it *Ping* for you in England because our UK distributor told us, 'You wouldn't want to play a game called fart, would you?'
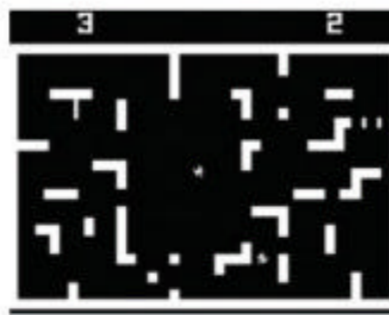
Tank started life as a traditional standup cabinet (right) but, like several Atari games of the period, was refreshed later to extend its lifespan. Crucially, it laid the foundations for *Combat*, the cartridge packed in with every VCS console

TANK
Developer/manufacturer Kee Games **Format** Coin-op **Release** 1974

One thing you need to understand about me is that I look at business like a game. There are strategies, tactics, opponents... and you play the market and play the companies who are competing with you. You want to mess with them. A good friend of mine, Joe Keenan, wanted to come and work for Atari. He was one hell of a marketing guy — smart and capable on all levels. I told him my main

concern was that we had exclusive distribution deals across the country, which were the norm back then, and I worried about the number-two distributor in each area. That's an outlet for people who are copying Atari! I wanted to satisfy that demand by getting Joe to start up our own competitor. He'd take our number-two engineer, our number-two guy in manufacturing, and set up across the street. That was how Kee Games began.

Tank was actually started in the Atari labs, with [pioneering Atari engineer/designer] Steve Bristow working on it, and he took it over to Kee Games, along with other games like *Spike*, a volleyball game. They got it ready for the next big trade show and then sold it to every distributor we didn't already have a deal with.

You can't ascribe success or failure to one single game because once you're in the business, it's a continuum. You have hits and misses, just like the movie business, and every so often you have a big hit — like *Tank*. *Tank* had really good game mechanics. It was fun, challenging and you immediately knew how to play it. You could have a good time in a short amount of time. We always had the games about to go into production in the cafeteria, and I'd play them with everybody. In fact, before that, we'd have a prototype machine in my office. And I also had a beer tap in my office. I'd say the beer tap would be turned on at 6pm, after quitting time, and we'd get together, drink beer, play the prototypes and talk about them. I always felt that they were the best strategy sessions we'd have.

As for Kee Games, we knew we couldn't keep this ruse going forever, so we started putting rumours out we were suing them for stealing trade secrets and our employees. About a month later, we said the lawsuit had been settled out of court and now Atari owned a part of Kee Games.

BREAKOUT
Developer/manufacturer Atari **Format** Coin-op **Release** 1976

No question, this one was my idea. I actually thought of *Breakout* laying on the beach in Hawaii. I drew out the game mechanics in the sand. I got back to Atari and wanted to get it into the [production] queue. We had
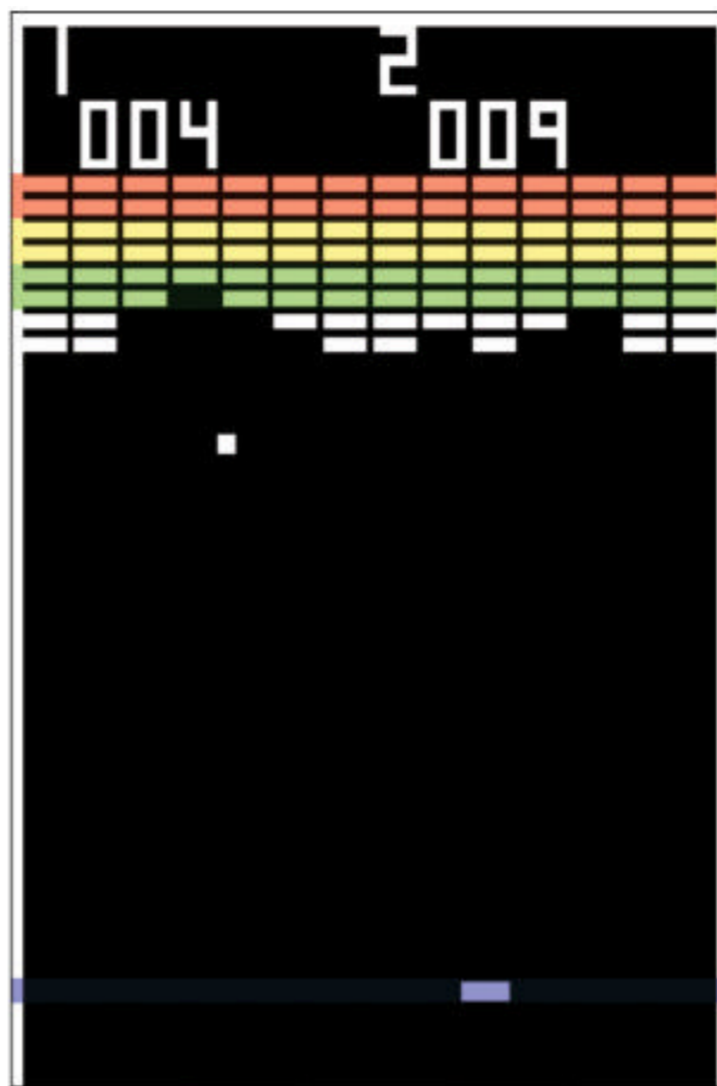
Unfortunately this mockup doesn't do a perfect job of recreating *Breakout* in its original form, which used strips of acetate to give colour to monochrome pixels

"I'D PAID JOBS $5,000, WHICH WAS A LOT BACK THEN, BUT HE'D ONLY GIVEN WOZNIAK HALF OF $500"

Breakout learned an important lesson from *Pong*: keep it simple. With just a bat that moved left and right via a spinner controller, the objective was straightforward, while the prison-break theme was largely superfluous

this thing where engineers could bid on the projects they wanted to work on — because they got bonuses if their product sold well — but no one wanted to do this one.

At the time, Steve Jobs had just come back from India. He'd gone there to be with a guru or something. Jobs was brilliant, opinionated and full-on. A really hard worker. I'd find him sleeping under his desk some mornings. We rehired him and I put him on the night shift and assigned him the *Breakout* project.

I knew that Steve Wozniak would actually be the one who'd do it. I always knew I was hiring two Steves for the price of one [laughs]. Wozniak would always be hanging around with Jobs and we'd talk about various things. He was painfully shy but we were both engineers and we had the ability to communicate. He'd talk to me, though he wouldn't necessarily look me in the eyes. I can remember talking to him about some thorny technical problem and he came up with a really novel solution. I had a level of respect for his technical prowess from those conversations.

I didn't know *Breakout* was one of the inspirations for *Space Invaders* until you just told me. Yeah, I can see the connection. How do I feel about it? It was just another day at the job. So many things we did at Atari inspired a lot of people. I'd say *Breakout* is in my top five favourite Atari games, along with *Asteroids*, *Tempest*, *Centipede* and *Tank*.

I do know I was the one that told Wozniak how much I'd paid Jobs for doing the *Breakout* project. He was sitting at my kitchen table years later and I asked him what he did with his half of the bonus I'd paid. He said he'd gone out for dinner. I said, 'Boy, that must have been one hell of a dinner'. I'd paid Jobs $5,000, which was a lot back then, but he'd only given Wozniak half of $500. Wozniak just sighed and said, 'Ah, he did it to me again'.

ATARI VCS
Manufacturer Atari **Release** 1977

The VCS was all about the time and the technology. There was no question in my mind that the best business model is the razor/razorblade, but to get a computer ▶

Evan Amos

that could play a videogame was expensive. Then the microprocessor became available and that solved the problem with Von Neumann architecture. It was the right technology at the right time, and we at Atari saw the opportunity.

Could we have brought that vision to market without getting the money from Warner? Great question. It's one of those things I just don't know. I think, possibly. We didn't need all that much money to make [the VCS] happen but we needed more than we had. We were going to go public but the market was choppy. I've often thought that if we'd got through the launch of the VCS with the money we had, the road ahead was paved with gold.

To be honest, part of the motivation for selling Atari to Warner was intellectual fatigue. I was working all the time and the sale settled my life a little bit. It allowed me to move into [the Folger Mansion in] Woodside, woo and wed my wife, and start my family again. I really like what my life became after the sale. Your personal life has to be the most important part of the equation.

"WE MADE SO MANY TECHNICAL COMPROMISES BECAUSE OF COST. IT ONLY HAD 128 BYTES OF MEMORY"

The design language of the VCS hardware is iconic, even if the functionality feels a little odd today. Consider: difficulty settings selected via physical switches

I don't know if the look of the console was important to its success. You have to make so many decisions in a project like this — some are pivotal, some are not — but then if you look at some of our competitors' products, which were plastic and looked like refrigerators... I think the sophisticated look of the VCS was, at the very least, helpful.

I believe the longevity of the VCS was a colossal mistake. When we designed it, we made so many technical compromises because of cost. It only had 128 bytes of memory and by the time we sold the first one, the cost of memory had already plunged ten thousand-fold. We could have made it so much more powerful. A year on from launch, I believe we could have had the graphics capability of the Famicom. The fact Atari kept making the VCS [for so long] led to the abandonment of the American game manufacturing industry to the Japanese. The attempt to put another few million units into the market in the '80s when the machine was long past its expiration date led to the crash of '83. No question of that in my mind.

PIZZA TIME THEATER

Founded 1977

I had the idea for this even before Atari was formed. I talked about it with Ted [Dabney] at Ampex around 1969 when I was flopping around various business ideas. The most successful pizza place in the area was called Pizza And Pipes, and it had this Wurlitzer theatre organ that had been taken apart and spread across the walls — the flutes here, the drums there. Huge mechanical nightmares.

We knew kids loved playing our games but there were no appropriate venues. They weren't allowed in bars, bowling alleys were a little rough and tumble, and this was 1976, so it was kind of before games made their way into 7-11s. It was a slamdunk opportunity to create a pizza parlour with a big arcade to provide the entertainment. And it wasn't rocket science to work out that we were selling games at Atari for around $2,000 which in their lifetime would earn $40,000 to $50,000 in cash drop. We were clearly on the wrong side of the equation.

When Warner bought out Atari, I did buy back [Pizza Time Theater — later renamed Chuck E Cheese], so yeah, it was close to my heart. More than that, it was one hell of a deal. I made ten times as much with Chuck E Cheese than I did with Atari.

The first wave of Sente Arcade Computer games included *Snake Pit* and *Hat Trick*, neither of which made it outside of the US market in large numbers. It was a concept a little ahead of its time: the JAMMA standard, introduced in 1985, essentially worked towards the same goals

SAC-I

Manufacturer Sente **Format** Coin-op **Release** 1984

Yes, it would be fair to say [Sente Technologies] was my attempt to create another Atari. I signed a seven-year non-compete agreement when I sold Atari to Warner but when that was coming to an end, I kind of cued up a new company that I could take over and move forward with, and that was what Sente was. I wanted to get back into the game business because I have the kind of brain that when I have a game idea, I want to put it into practice. I've always had this bias to action. After Atari, if I got a game idea, I had no real outlet, which is very frustrating.

You would make the most money from a machine during the first week it was in a location. Novelty was really important, so a few months after it had been in a bar, it would be moved to bar number two, then three and so on. That was expensive: it would take two people, a dolly and a truck — there was a joke in the coin-op business that we were actually in the moving business. I thought the idea of just being able to change the [arcade machine's] circuit board and the marquee would make it simple. We had built a really robust cabinet with interchangeable games, and I thought that would be a better business model — and that was the idea behind the Sente Arcade Computer [SAC-I].

There were two problems. First, it's hard to incubate a new business. Sente was small and I was used to being the Goliath in the market. My name was still Nolan Bushnell but suddenly my company was not Atari. Secondly, trying to force a new standard, a new idea, down the ecosystem was not something a small company could do. It was a different time and a different space. We had a couple of hits but it was actually at the tail end of the coin-operated game business in some ways.

I'm not sure if we could have made it a success. I know I was investing a lot of time and money in other tech ventures, and I've reflected on the fact that I was no longer mono-focused on the games business. I've gone on to have monster successes... and monster failures. ■
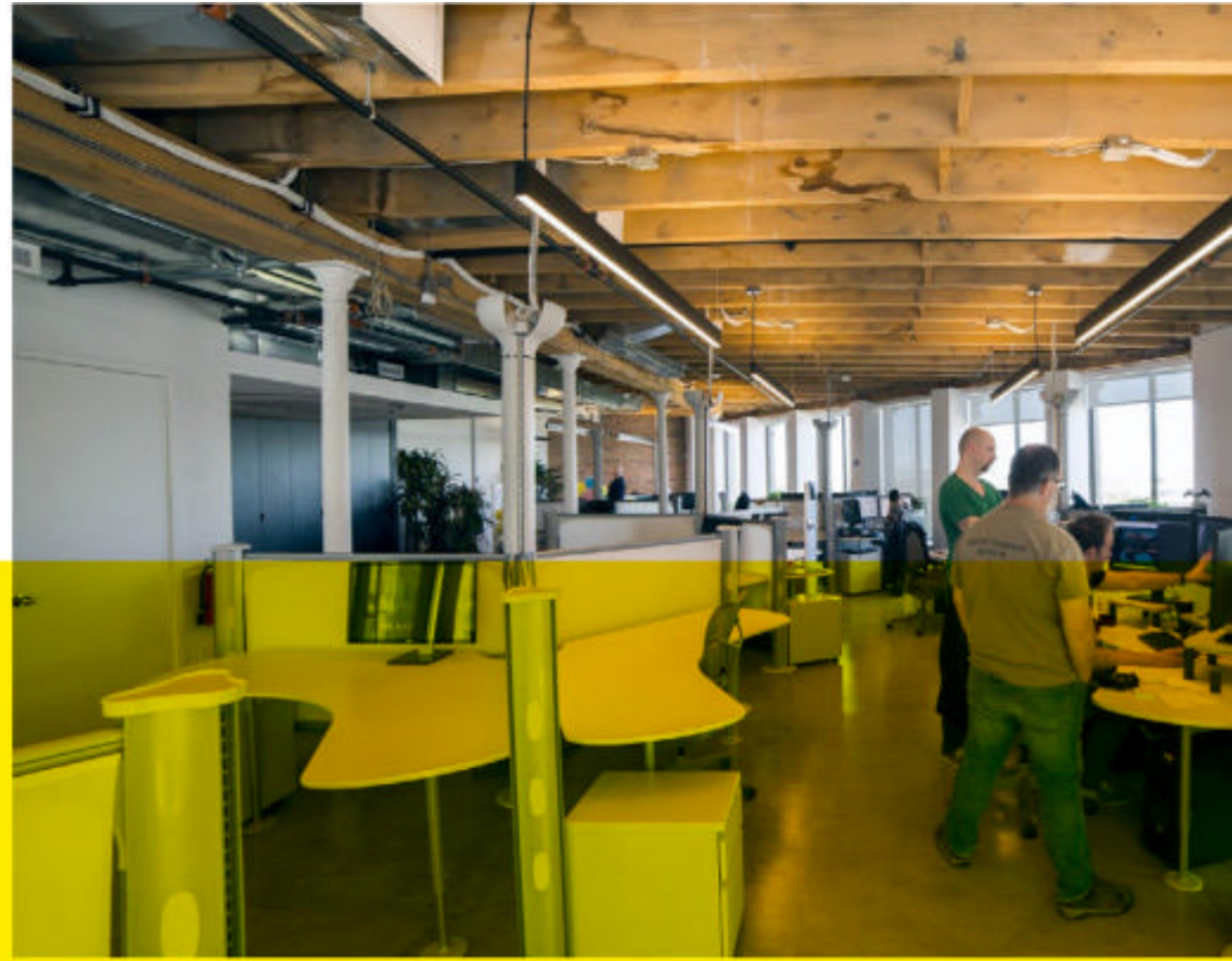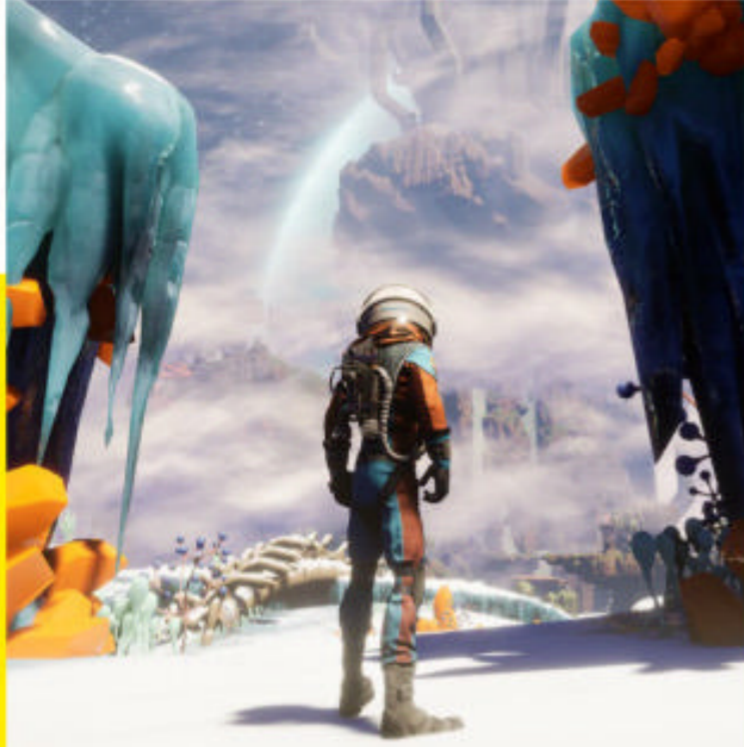
CANADA

DRIVE

In Montreal, the world's largest concentration of game-making talent is still growing – but is it also growing up? ▶

By Jeremy Peel
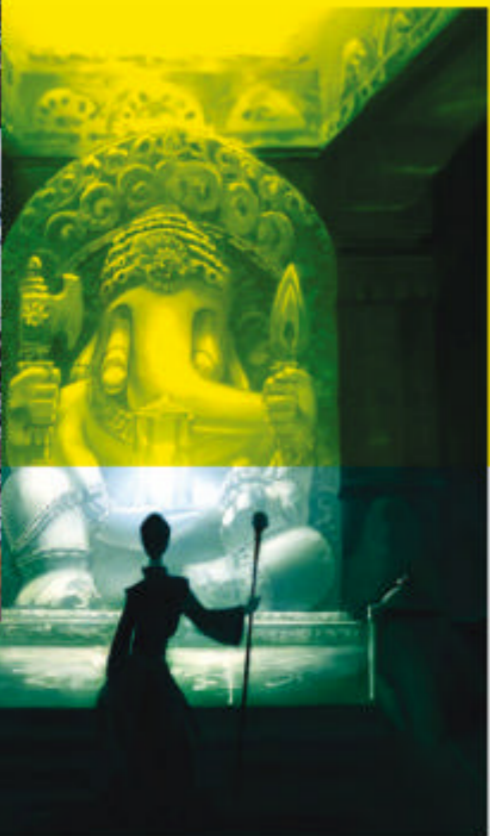
n a sunny, chilly Tuesday morning in Montreal, **Patrice Désilets** and **Jean-François Boivin** went for a walk. It was May 2014, and the pair were fresh from losing their project — *1666: Amsterdam*, a casualty of THQ's bankruptcy. Though both had made their names with *Assassin's Creed*, they found themselves suddenly independent, unexpectedly building something new in the shadow of the triple-A monoliths they had helped create.

"We were on the street, and met with some of our lawyers, then had lunch at a deli," Boivin recalls. "The bill came up to $16.66."

Perhaps it was a sign that their ideas could live outside the big-budget studio system. If so, the gods make shrewd industry analysts. Désilets and Boivin's company, Panache Digital Games, has since sold more than a million copies of its first game, *Ancestors*. And though there's been no announcement, Désilets has made no secret of his plans to direct a new *1666* at Panache. All signs, beginning with that bill, point to an unholy resurrection.

The ex-triple-A indies of Montreal aren't putting too much stock in fate, however. As Andrzej Sapkowski once put it in his Witcher novels: "Destiny is insufficient. Something more is necessary." Some developers, including Jade Raymond's Haven, are leaning on big backers such as Sony. Many are finding ways to band together, using their combined heft to affect change in Quebec's government. And at least a few rely on a hazy sense of camaraderie — making space for each other as the canopy of triple-A studios competing for talent grows ever thicker above their heads.

Montreal's birth as a videogame Hollywood is well catalogued, so a recap should be brief. In the late '90s, a Quebec government looking to offset the

THE CANOPY OF TRIPLE-A STUDIOS COMPETING FOR TALENT GROWS EVER THICKER

Panache's *Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey* was criticised for its brutal trial-and-error learning process, but that hasn't stopped it selling 1m+ copies

Patrice Désilets, creative director and co-founder, Panache Digital Games

Désilets made his name with the *Assassin's Creed* series. A fascination with the way memory is passed down recurs in his work

Jean-François Boivin, producer and co-founder, Panache Digital Games

L O N G   D I S T A N C E

While many corporations have stated their intentions to set up new Montreal-based studios in 2021, it remains to be seen just how many of their employees will actually live in the city. The pandemic has fundamentally changed triple-A's perspective on remote working – and in the long-term this paradigm shift might make a mockery of the geographically rooted big-budget studio. October saw the announcement of Possibility Space, the new company from Undead Labs founder Jeff Strain. Its enviable dev roster, including *Half-Life: Alyx*'s Jane Ng and *Watch Dogs: Legion*'s Liz England, is surely made possible by its deeply 2021 approach to online collaboration. Though technically based in New Orleans, Possibility Space employees are free to work from wherever they choose. Local sandwich shops won't be thanking them for the flexibility.

decline of the local textiles industry made a bold overture: a publicly funded tax credit scheme. Designed to lure multimedia companies to the province's largest city, it worked — and then some.

Ubisoft was first to set up shop, and in the wake of *Splinter Cell* and *Prince Of Persia*, other publishers followed: not just THQ, but Square Enix and Warner Bros. Thousands of jobs were created, but in the process the city developed a reputation for factory-like gamemaking. Tired of 120-hour weeks and creative stricture, Montreal's most seasoned talents began to set up independent studios with cultures which, in some ways, were a reaction against triple-A.

"The projects people work on at Panache are not a third iteration of the same idea," Désilets says, "or the 15th iteration of an IP."

"We didn't crunch at all on *Journey To The Savage Planet*," Raccoon Logic creative director **Alex Hutchinson** says. "We were able to get it done while keeping everyone between the hours of nine and six, which is especially important because most of the team have little children these days."

"As people get older, they're deciding that they want to see the impact of their work on a daily basis," studio head **Reid Schneider** adds. "It's much harder in those larger studios of 500 or 1,000." ▶

Getty Images: Linda Raymond

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BRIGHT LIGHT

Reports of sexual misconduct at Ubisoft last year led to the departure of the company's Canadian studios managing director, Yannis Mallat. It's something Jade Raymond has given plenty of thought to as she sets up Haven in Montreal. "All of those stories are really heartbreaking and disappointing to read about, and obviously something that myself and all the other Haven co-founders want to change and will change," she says. "You want to do it by shining a bright light on all the great things about the game industry, and have great role models for people, and create that really great place where people can feel at home, be themselves, have a safe haven and experience kindness while they're at work. I think we have to act responsibly, and when we can make a change, make a change."

These are common sentiments heard everywhere among developers who have been around the block once or twice. But for some Quebec-born developers, who have spent years making money for companies based in France and the US, independence has a patriotic ring to it, too.

"For us it was very important to build something that had perennial value for the patrimony of Quebec independent videogame developers," Boivin says. "In Quebec we're really good at making games, but we almost uniquely make games for other people. We were very adamant that the residual value lies in keeping the IP. That message came across very well with our first investors, who are Quebec-born entrepreneurs."

This talk of heritage is unusual in an industry built on short-term tech trends and adaptability. But in Montreal's case, it's wise. One day, the major publishers will up sticks to chase a deeper tax cut in a different province. But the roots that Quebec's indies plant themselves won't budge.

Montreal developers have already founded one significant new local institution outside the rarified world of triple-A: La Guilde. The Quebec Independent Video Game Developers Guild, to give the cooperative its Anglophonic title, is the biggest organisation of its kind in the world. Currently representing more than 230 game studios — that's a total of over 2,500 employees — its gravity is sufficient to turn the heads of government entities.

"It allowed us to negotiate massive rebates for things like collective insurance," says Boivin, who served as a member of La Guilde's board from its inception in 2016 until his mandate was up in 2020. "The fact that we're together and have this common voice, that has a lot of weight."

Panache was one of La Guilde's founding studios, and Désilets evangelises the group whenever he's invited to deliver talks abroad. "Together we're bigger than we thought we were alone," he says. Another member is Red Barrels, the studio behind *Outlast*, led by *Prince Of Persia* and *Assassin's Creed* veteran **Philippe Morin**. "It has given a lot of visibility to indie studios," he says, "and it has helped establishing an ecosystem in which all kinds of studios can coexist."

Philippe Morin, senior game designer and co-founder of Red Barrels, creator of the *Outlast* series (right)

Jade Raymond, CEO and founder, Haven Entertainment Studios

Beyond sharing resources and knowledge with each another, the indie studios of Montreal have an unspoken rule, as Panache tells it: they don't hire staff away from each other.

"All the CEOs of all these studios, we come from the same cloth," Boivin explains. "We were at the university of triple-A major publishers, then decided to spin out, mainly for creative freedom. And so the CEOs are great friends in many respects. We share some of the same hardships of financing and finding publishers. It's hard enough trying to find really good talent. Panache has never poached anybody from another independent studio."

After Red Barrels finished work on *Outlast 2*, its programming team helped another indie studio ship its game as a favour. Morin, though, is wary of the unspoken no-poaching rule's long-term future. "There's definitely a feeling of camaraderie among indies, that's for sure," he says. "I haven't heard of an indie studio going after another to hire their core team. But hiring is [becoming] more and more challenging, so we'll see what happens."

Getty Images: Peter Unger

The backdrop to Morin's comment is an influx of new triple-A studios in recent years. Montreal has experienced a fresh phase of growth to become an even bigger game development hub via the arrival of Gearbox, Tencent, 2K, Amazon, Dontnod, New World Interactive, Phoenix Labs, Quantic Dream, Room 8 and Deck13 — all since 2020. These companies have greater incentive to move in than Ubisoft ever did, benefitting not just from tax credits but also 20 years of accumulated local knowhow. Given the sheer number of newcomers, there's concern that even Montreal doesn't have enough talent to fill all the roles on offer.

"We now have Google, Amazon, Epic, NetEase," Désilets says. "That is, I feel, disturbing the ecosystem a bit. Because they're big and they don't care. They come to make great games and make money. At the end of the day, Montreal is not Tokyo or New York or LA. It's a small-big city. It's four million people in Greater Montreal. Those big studios are just arriving, in competition between themselves, for the same resources we aim to attract."

"THAT IS DISTURBING THE ECOSYSTEM A BIT. THEY'RE BIG AND THEY DON'T CARE"

Morin describes the growth in studio numbers since Red Barrels was founded in 2011 as exponential. "The upside is that people are less concerned about leaving the safety of big studios to join a startup," he says. "But at the same time we have to deal with the fact that there are currently a lot more job offers than there are developers. So it's putting a lot of stress on everyone."

The success of *Outlast* has enabled Red Barrels to stay competitive without taking on outside investors or publishers, despite a "drastic increase" in salaries over the past half a decade. But Morin is concerned about the majority of indie studios who don't have such deep pockets. "Our nice ecosystem might be different in a few years," he says.

Hutchinson, too, agrees it has become harder and harder to attract sufficient talent to employ, but suggests Montreal's seemingly bottomless well of developers has a habit of surprising people. "You have this feeder farm of Ubisoft, and they do a great job of onboarding new people, who go through and then join other studios," he says. "We've been saying for ten years, 'Where is the talent going to come from?' And somehow it keeps happening." ▶

IT DOESN'T HURT THAT QUEBEC HAS A REPUTATION FOR THE GOOD LIFE, EITHER

Of course, the studio owners' concern about rising salaries is not a worry shared by employees, who stand to make a good living by moving to Montreal. It certainly doesn't hurt that Quebec has an international reputation for the good life, either. While recent social and political upheaval in the US, UK and Poland has made them unappetising destinations for relocation, Montreal is famed for its great schools, social system and, as Boivin drily puts it, "the best restaurants in North America." The prospect of the parental leave alone has us ready to hang up our Zoom call and pack a bag.

Getty Images: Bruce Yuanyue Bi

"It's a very good city to attract foreign talent," Boivin says. "The cost of living isn't that high. It's super safe. It's a good place to be alive and create." Except, Désilets adds, during the five-month winter. Boivin protests: "Some people like it!"

Some of the city's developers will soon have more time to spend outside: Square Enix announced in October that Eidos Montreal will move to a four-day working week. It's the kind of differentiator that's likely to give the studio an edge when scrapping for new hires. "I guess they need to bring a little bit of independent spirit inside the big boat," Désilets says. Panache has long reserved Mondays for going to the bank or the dentist, and derives the length of its generous winter break from a popular French-Canadian folk song. "There's a lyric which says, 'It's the 23rd of December, Merry Christmas, see you on the seventh of January,'" Désilets explains. "And I say, 'This is the HR policy for Christmas vacation at Panache.'"

Locally, the potential talent drought is addressed by another sort of institution that's built to last: education. "All of the universities have developed around this industry," Haven founder **Jade Raymond** says. "They popped up."

Raymond herself went to school in Montreal, and knew she wanted to make games from the age of 14. But she applied to McGill's computer science programme, knowing there was no equivalent for games. "Now, there are probably over ten different specific game programmes," she says. "There are summer camps, game coding classes my kids have taken. They're both really into it."

That educational infrastructure should help ensure future diversity in Montreal's videogame industry, training new developers outside of the studio system which has failed marginalised voices. Whether that young talent then chooses to engage with the mega-studios or starts out in the city's indie sphere with the support of La Guilde will be up to them.

"The courses have become a lot better and the people giving the courses have become a lot better, so kids are a lot more educated and skilled," Boivin says. "They come out of these universities and specialised schools and say, 'Do I want to be an entry-level designer in a big studio? Or do I want to give it a shot?' Then you have La Guilde, so mentorship and collaboration is at an all-time high. They avoid some of the mistakes."

Some will come knocking at the doors of Panache, Haven, Raccoon Logic and Red Barrels. One hiring advantage the newer studios have over the triple-A behemoths is their modern values. Haven's favourite word is 'kindness', which could sound wishy-washy, were it not coming from the mouth of someone as demonstrably ambitious and unyielding as Raymond.

"Right now we're just getting all the basics in place — we have 56 people, but our next big focus is supporting new emerging talent," she says. "We're talking about designing some masterclasses to help with training. It's very fulfilling for the more experienced talent to be able to channel some of that learning and help mentor, and exciting to understand how the younger generation of gamers thinks about games. It's a really good symbiotic relationship."

When Raccoon Logic announced its formation in August of this year, its overwhelmingly white and male team makeup drew criticism on social media. Hutchinson and Schneider admit that diversity was not

EDGE
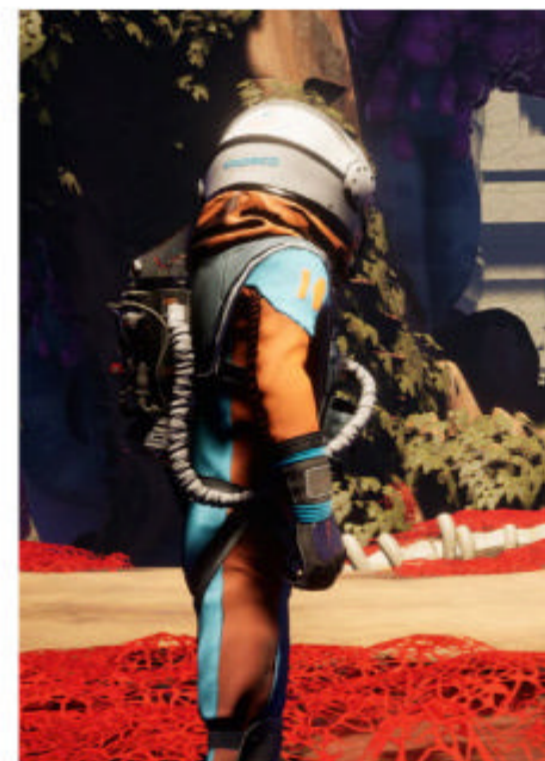
Alex Hutchinson, creative director at Raccoon Logic, was once part of the Ubisoft machine responsible for *Far Cry 4* (left)

Raccoon Logic studio head Reid Schneider previously worked on *Journey To The Savage Planet* (above) while at Typhoon Studios

T R A S H   P A N D A S

Raccoon Logic's core team has worked together on and off for 20 years – at triple-A studios, as Typhoon Studios, and most recently within Google Stadia's short-lived internal development team. What keeps them from breaking apart is a sense of safety and support. "We made sure that everyone [at Typhoon] got paid out when we sold to Google," Alex Hutchinson says. "The entirety of our team had ownership in the company, and that's true again for Raccoon Logic." By the same token, the studio's leaders negotiated "better than expected" Google severance packages for staff who had been part of Typhoon's acquisition little more than a year earlier. "It just creates more trust," studio head Reid Schneider says. "And that's what enables you to keep good people."

at the forefront of their minds during hiring: 17 out of their 20 staff were former colleagues at Google Stadia, "scooped up" in the wake of mass redundancy.

"There wasn't a lot of going out and grabbing them," Hutchinson tells us. "We tried to keep as many people from that situation as possible. That was a big motivator early on."

The controversy is a reminder that new Montreal studios aren't exempted from the cultural shortcomings of their triple-A progenitors — in fact, without great effort to the contrary, they simply inherit them. Raccoon Logic is determined to make that effort, however. "Taking out bias is really the key thing as much as possible," Hutchinson says. "You can only hire from the pool that you have, but you do your best to make sure the opportunities are equal and fair for everybody. We'll keep grinding on it as we move forward. We think that the studio in five years will look very different from the studio as it does today."

More recently, Raccoon Logic has reached out to a professor at École NAD, the Montreal art school, and begun to sift through CVs. "We'd love to have more women in the space, and we don't want as many old people, like us," Schneider says. "Bringing in some very keen junior talent, who we can help grow their careers and be a stepping stone for, is awesome."

It's the independent studios that will ultimately decide Montreal's cultural future. Don't be fooled by the acres of triple-A office buildings: the presence of major publishers in the city is, even now, contingent on tax credits. When the Quebec government dared to scale back its 37.5-per-cent salary relief fund in 2014, Ubisoft was positively sniffy about the region's inherent merits.

"I think we need to analyse what this means for us," then-Ubisoft Montreal head **Yannis Mallat** told IGN. "Then, once the analysis is done, we'll be able to decide what the next stage is for us. I think what Quebec has become over the years in terms of videogame development, it's not a hotbed. So obviously this tax programme was here to help build that environment. We see this programme as an important reason for the growth of the sector in Quebec."

Evidently, Ubisoft's analysts concluded that emigration wasn't yet worth the hassle. But it seems inevitable that a better offer in another city will eventually trigger a corporate evacuation. In that event, it's the indie studios truly invested in Quebec and its people that will remain — and their values, conscious or otherwise, that will shape Montreal's work environment and output in the decades to come.

"One thing that is really Montreal is helping each other out," Désilets says. "Even if, yes, we're stealing employees and being stolen. At the end of the day, if you don't want to continue in our adventure, it's not a prison. Maybe it's because, JF [Boivin] and I, we had the feeling of working in a prison." ￭

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

F R O S T P U N K

How a steampunk city builder ended
up tackling its very own climate crisis

BY SEAN MARTIN

Frostpunk frames the end of the world in simple terms: global cooling. As the Earth begins to freeze and Victorian society collapses, people migrate en masse to the generators – a last-ditch attempt by industrialised nations to survive icy storms and plummeting temperatures. But as for what caused this global cooling? Lead writer **Wojciech Setlak** is emphatic that the answer doesn't matter. "It's not important why it's cooling – it's cooling, and it's killing us!"

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. After all, Frostpunk wasn't the first 11 Bit Studios game to be more interested in effect than cause. "*This War Of Mine* was not a game about war," Setlak says of the studio's acclaimed debut. "It's about people who've had their lives changed by war. The war isn't incidental, but it's not important what they are fighting for. In the same way, *Frostpunk* is not a game about climate change. It's about consequences."

These consequences, most often, stem not from the circumstances but from your choices as player. As de facto leader of the last city on Earth, your actions and laws determine the price people pay for survival. What most sets *Frostpunk* apart from its city-building peers, though, is the way it abandons the genre's default perspective of distant omniscience, instead forcing you to consider the people with whose lives and liberties you're bartering. "In many strategy games you are very far away from the people," lead designer **Jakub Stokalski** explains. "In *Frostpunk*, we took that weakness and tried to turn it in our favour."

Despite your position of power, you are not the hero of *Frostpunk*. "Our hero is the society, the people," Setlak says. If you treat them like a resource or push them too far, they can just as easily depose you.

The key to this tension, Stokalski says, was "giving the people agency", allowing them to go on strike or make demands of the player. "They're not there just to do your bidding," he says. "They actually have opinions on how things are going."

The result is a rare creature: a city builder that feels like walking a tightrope through a blizzard, as you balance hope and discontent, survival and sacrifice. *Frostpunk* pulls no punches – this is a game that constantly calls you to account, twisting the knife every chance it gets, and all the while the weather is turning, and the temperature is dropping. It's strange to think, then, that there was a time when there was no frost in *Frostpunk*.

The phrase 'coal fighting with snow' was a key contrast in defining **Frostpunk**'s strong, distinctive art direction

Back in 2014, as 11 Bit was preparing to release *This War Of Mine*, there was no guarantee that the game, with its grim depiction of non-combatants trying to survive in a war-torn city, was going to be successful. And so, a backup plan was devised. "A gamer's game," as Stokalski says. "A city builder set in a steampunk world." Its working title: *Industrial*. Where

"WHAT WILL YOU DO TO ENSURE SOCIETY SURVIVES? THIS WAS THE CORE QUESTION THAT EVERYTHING WAS BUILT UPON"

Frostpunk represents a stripped-down, utilitarian take on steampunk, *Industrial* was more straightforwardly over-the-top, with giant cogs, pipes weaving between buildings, and a skyline of belching smokestacks.

"As far as a game prototype is concerned, the demo was quite complete," Stokalski remembers. But then the unexpected happened: "*This War Of Mine* came out and it was a huge success for the studio. Everyone felt like this was the sort of game we should be making." And so *Industrial* took on more of the atmosphere of its predecessor. "That game asks: 'What will you do to survive this horrid situation?' The natural evolution of that is: 'What will you do to ensure society survives?' This was the core question that everything was built upon."

However, at the risk of once again emphasising cause over effect, this doesn't explain how the game formerly known as

Industrial found itself caught up in an icy apocalypse. According to lead artist **Łukasz Juszczyk**, though, this was just the logical consequence of the steampunk setting. "Steam itself is not the most effective power source," he says. "But steam also produces heat – and heat is a core element of survival in cold weather."

Which brings us to the steaming heart of *Frostpunk*'s city: the generator. Your entire settlement huddles around its warmth, and only as you upgrade its range can you tentatively expand into the cold, building outwards in rings. But while the concept of the generator was "known from early designs", according to Juszczyk, this wasn't actually the original source of the city builder's radial design. Rather, that came from the simple hole in the ground in which your city is housed.

"It wasn't until later that we realised how many answers the hole gave us," Juszczyk says. "It was really important for the art department, since it provided this vivid and iconic landmark. But what was most important was that the hole established the boundaries of our world. It's both epic and monumental, but also adds this feeling of alienation and claustrophobia. In this frozen world you are alone, you are the last city, you are a survivor in a hole."

There is one way of escaping the confines of the hole, though: through the game's exploration mechanic. You can send scout expeditions out into the Frostlands beyond, in search of survivors, supplies or other generators that might still be burning. It's a much-needed respite from the burdens of civil maintenance, the camera pulling out to the clouds to reveal a larger, snow-bleached overworld, with sunken landships, ruined cities and dramatic ice structures waiting to be discovered. When we mention the size of this world to Juszczyk, though, he finds it amusing, because from his perspective "the world is really small."

"It's smoke and mirrors," he explains. "We wanted to give the impression that the game was bigger, but if you think about it, Frostland is just a nicely executed map. It has no details or landmarks. What we are doing, though, is teasing your imagination through beats and illustrations. We can't sculpt huge monuments or make it a *God Of War*-style epic, but we have awesome concept artists and 2D illustrators, so we used that to our advantage." ▶

This same practice of working within developmental constraints is evident in the game's call-to-action system. These illustrated text events are used to provide key narrative choices and beats, but, as Setlak explains, they are also "a way for the player to empathise with his people," granting a window into the often grim realities that result from your decisions and helping the developers resolve their early struggles making Frostpunk's people feel acknowledged.

"At first we thought, 'Hey, we've got this nice city – why don't we zoom in and animate these dudes?'" Juszczyk says. "But it still wasn't enough to make those people feel impactful to the player. That's when we came up with the idea of the calls to action, the big soot stains and splotches with text highlighting important moments. We thought it'd be cool to use fancy triple-A animations for those, but we quickly realised it was too production-heavy, and wasn't flexible in nailing down the tonality of the social aspects, so our artists came up with those parallax 2D illustrations. And in the end, showing those moments in freeze-frame actually felt a lot more appropriate."

Giving a voice to the populace isn't the only benefit of the call-to-action system – it's also a tool used to test the player. Will they side with the people, or ease the difficulty by imposing ever more extreme laws? Via two upgrade trees, Faith and Order, these 'paths' begin innocuously enough, with the establishing of a house of prayer or a neighbourhood watch, but follow either far enough (into the realms of public penance and propaganda centres) and you can effectively eliminate concerns of hope, discontent and any risk of being overthrown.

Stokalski cites the metaphor of boiling a frog: making a series of incremental changes so small that it's difficult to notice that things are turning bad. "Having this structure [of laws] provides you with real tools to solve your problems at any time," he says. "Why not take one small step further?"

To ensure players are tempted by these extreme measures, pressure is applied constantly. You're kept in perpetual crisis, always on the brink of disaster, yet rarely tipping over the edge. Finding this balance wasn't easy, of course, but Stokalski explains that the final game's approach is dependent on two primary elements: workforce and temperature.

"Temperature is special because it can be used to increase demand on resources," he says. "We can make a crisis happen that requires you to

Q&A

Jakub Stokalski
Lead Designer, Frostpunk

How do you view Frostpunk's place within 11 Bit Studios' future?
From the very beginning, Frostpunk was regarded as an IP rather than a single game. We thought, 'If this works out, we are building a world that we can set other things in.' There's even this [quote] from Patryk Grzeszczuk, our marketing director at the time, saying, "We might even make a Frostpunk RPG". So everyone thinks we're making a Frostpunk RPG now.

And are you?
Well, I mean, a Frostpunk RPG sounds cool, don't get me wrong. But the cornerstone of the IP is dealing in large-scale social situations where the player has agency, and I definitely think we haven't said the last word there, and what we did say was very focused in the mechanics we had. So to me, personally, it's about exploring more emergent, more complex and more interrelated social situations in this world.

As you expand that scope, how important is it to maintain the way you made Frostpunk – that is, defined to some extent by limitations?
I think you have limitations in every game you make, but it's like what we were saying about that unique perspective in strategy games – these limitations are actually opportunities to say something. When Frostpunk was in development, there was this question of how to make the player feel as connected to the people as in This War Of Mine, but at some point it stopped being a problem and became a feature. So I'd say that while a larger scope might make some things that were possible in Frostpunk impossible, it will provide other opportunities, and playing on these is a central part of how 11 Bit Studios developed Frostpunk. I don't see that changing for any future games we might make.

invest a lot of time scaling up your coal production to keep everyone warm. But it's not enough just to research a new building – you also need people working in it, and this creates some interesting interplays. You might need to research a new tech, but your engineers are tied up in medical posts because you have too many sick."

These "cascades of crisis" enable Frostpunk to tighten the screws if you're ever getting too big for your boots. Early in development, though, the adaptive play they demand simply wasn't possible, because the tech tree lacked options for players to deal with their current circumstances. ▶
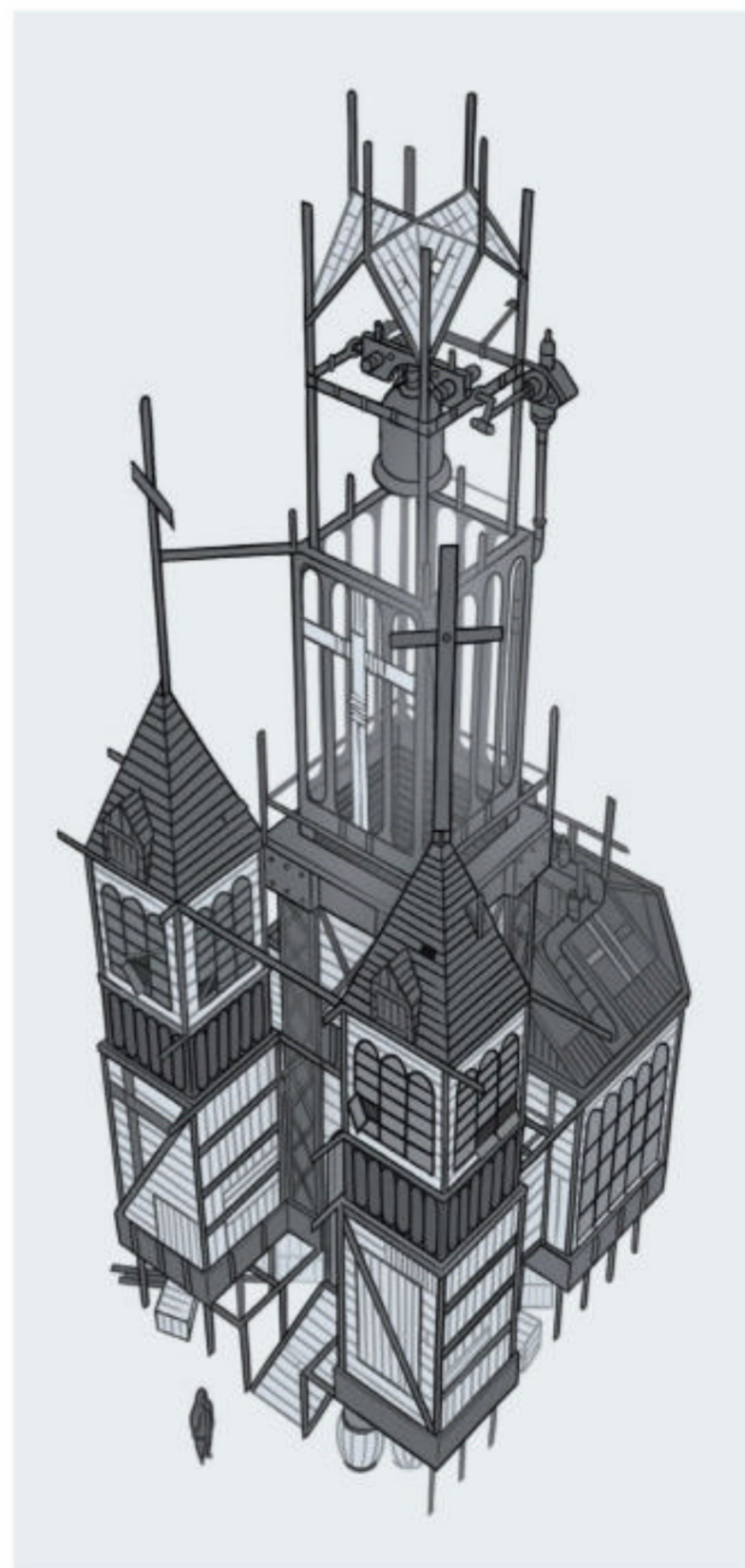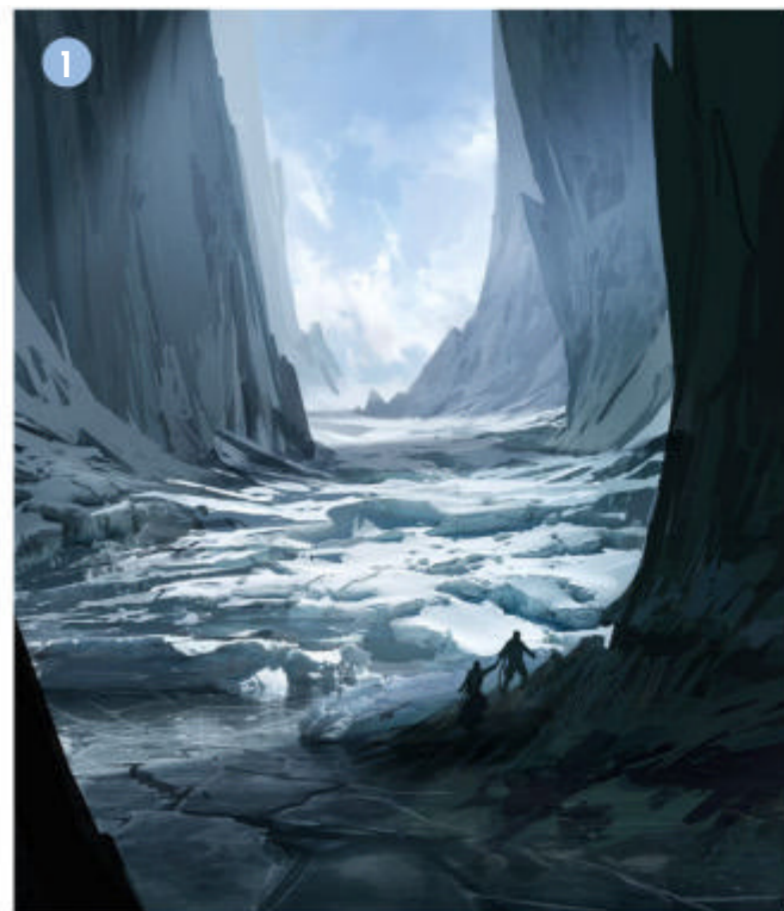
① "This landscape is the setting for human dramas, some of which we take part in, and some of which we just witness and discover," lead writer Wojciek Setlak says about the icy wastes of Frostland.
② "We were trying not to make things cool just for the sake of it, but there was one exception," Łukasz Juszczyk explains of *Frostpunk*'s steam-powered Automatons.
③ The aesthetic of 'the city in the hole' became a vital part of *Frostpunk*'s visual identity.
④ *Industrial*, a more traditional city builder, established the game's steampunk city and Victorian-futuristic setting. According to Juszczyk, it "was kind of a creative treatment for *Frostpunk*"
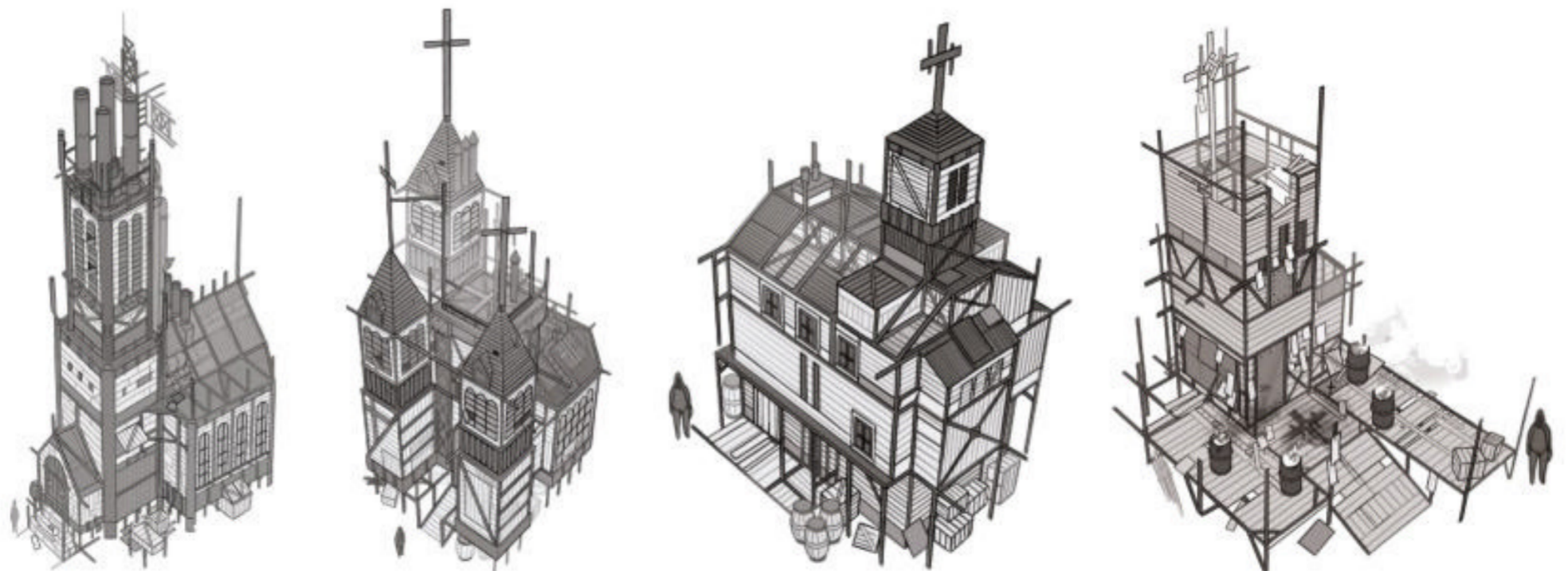
"If you just have one way to do something, and a crisis comes, the only question is 'can you do it fast enough?'" Stokalski says. "That's not strategy."

Every aspect of *Frostpunk* is carefully balanced, to the player experience and to 11 Bit's own circumstances as it developed the game. But more than the sum of its parts, it is bound together by something magical: the mood. Where *Industrial* might have been a capable embodiment of the steampunk aesthetic, the game it grew into is one of the most atmospheric city builders ever made: oppressive and bleak, yet somehow never without hope – a lantern shining in a snowstorm.

Which is appropriate, perhaps, given that Juszczyk refers to this atmosphere as a "creative beacon". It was one the team followed throughout development, right from that first pivot point, and it might be the secret of 11 Bit's success.

Stokalski sums it up concisely: "Mood is the glue between art and design."

There's a very particular way that this mood tends to be remembered, at least when people talk about *Frostpunk*. As Setlak jokes, players tend to accuse *Frostpunk* of "making them do terrible things". But after multiple expansions, the announcement of a mobile port and, now, a sequel, it seems safe to assume that a lot of people find value in being tested in this way, in being asked difficult questions.

And not only the one Stokalski established as the core of *Frostpunk*'s design. In the context of a game that challenges the god's-eye view by making you answerable to your people, the question of 'What will you do to ensure society survives?' morphs into one that cuts right to the heart of our climate crisis: 'How much change can society accept?' "The idea was to portray a society under the pressure of extreme change, but of course, this is what's happening in reality," Setlak says. "Sometimes people refuse to accept reality because the change that stems from circumstances is too extreme. *Frostpunk* is absolutely a commentary on that. If you push people too hard, some will always refuse to see the writing on the wall. People cling to what they know."

Frostpunk might not be a game about climate change – or not about its causes, anyway – but it's certainly an accomplished depiction of how a society attempts to cope with its outcomes. With *Frostpunk 2* now on the horizon, it seems 11 Bit is determined to continue exploring these effects. At least, for as long as the city survives. ■
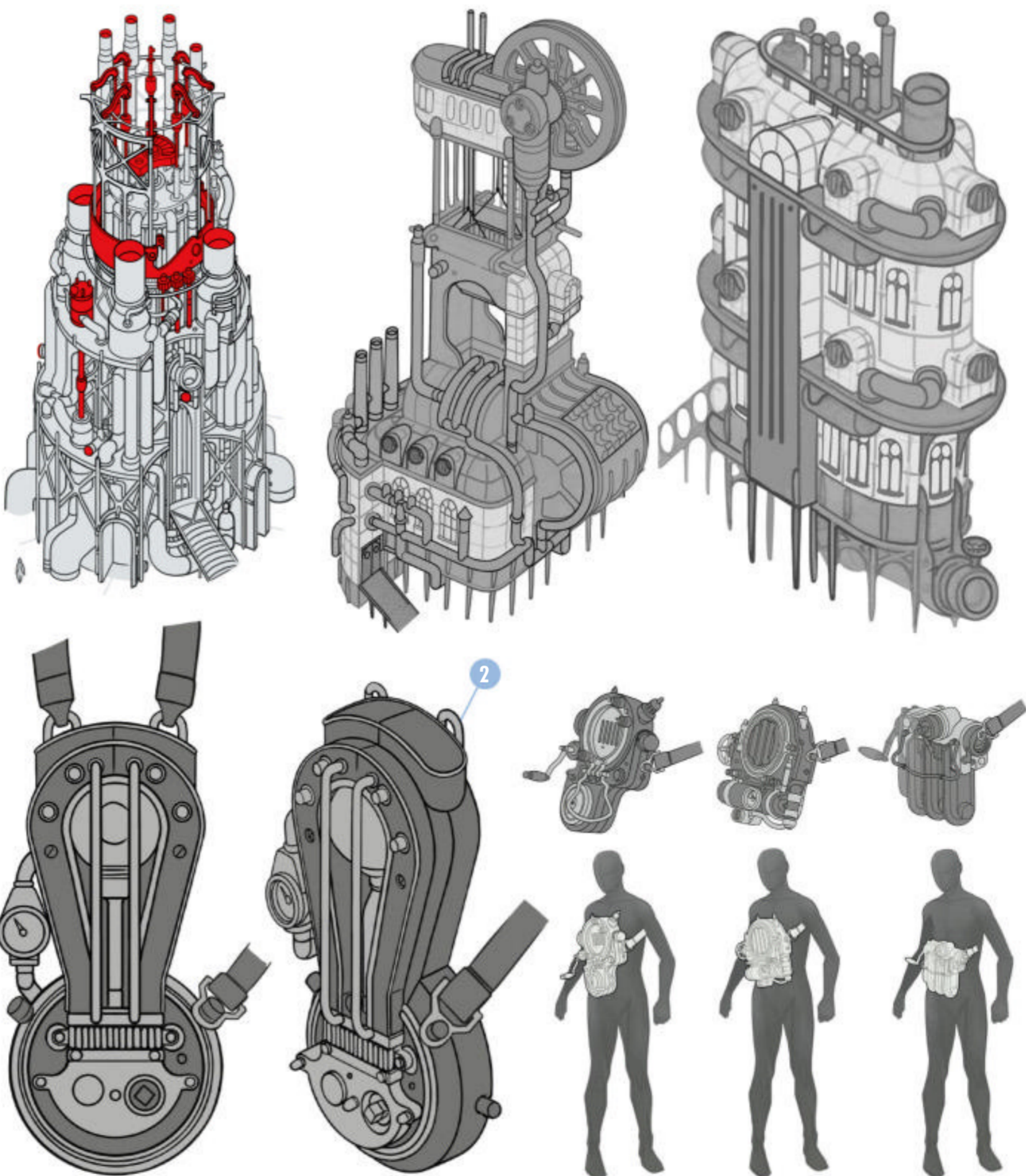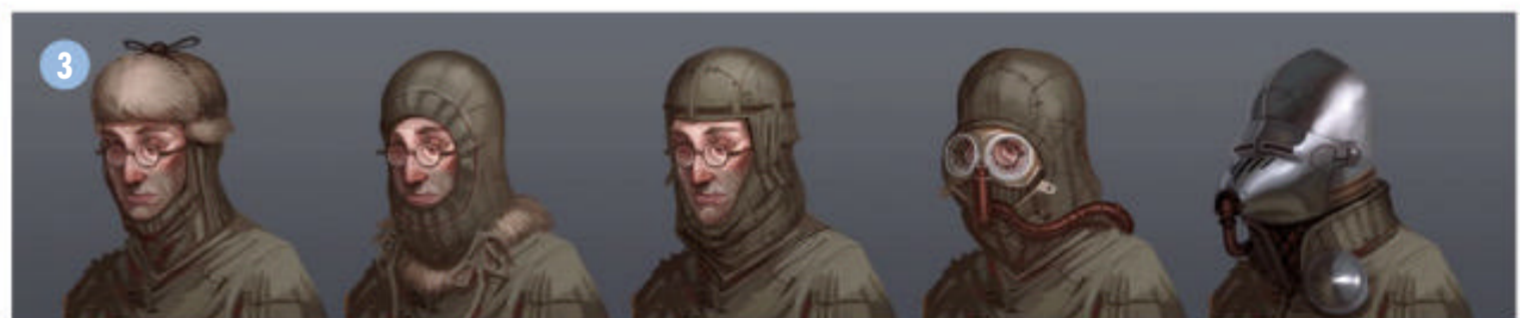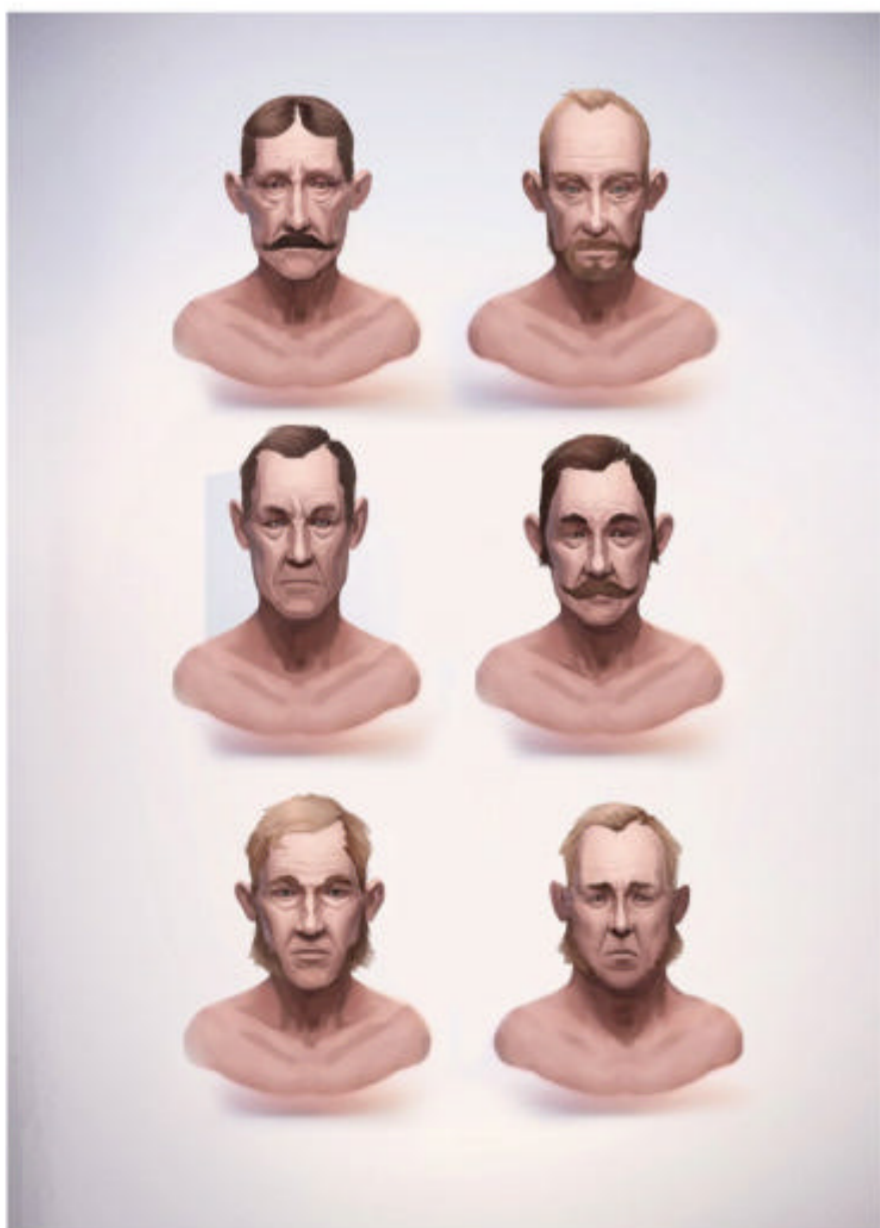
① "Getting the reader, viewer, or player to care about people, then putting them in difficult situations is a very old recipe for entertainment," Setlak tells us. "And all art is to some extent entertainment."

② The lamp, a relic powered by a mysterious source – definitely not coal – is a unifying element in the game, being common to every *Frostpunk* character. Lamps provide light and heat to workers, engineers and children alike.

③ "We are still going to explore that question of how societies change under pressure," Setlak says of the forthcoming *Frostpunk 2*.

④ "It was a period when things were changing both in terms of technology and its social impact, yet there was still rampant inequality," Stokalski explains when we ask what led to *Frostpunk*'s distinctive Victorian science-fiction setting. "That felt very relatable"

10TONS

The Finnish shoot-'em-up specialist on two decades of top-down change

By Aaron Potter

During the early era of casual games, making your name wasn't easy for anyone. But in 2003, with that scene growing on PC and most new developers chasing a quick hit, a small team in Tampere, Finland found breakout success by going against the tide. 10tons founder and CEO **Tero Alatalo** and team decided to embrace a classic genre in danger of being deserted: the twin-stick shooter.

"I'm not sure twin-stick top-down shooters were even a thing on PC back then," Alatalo says. 10tons vice CEO **Sampo Töyssy** concurs: "3D games were all the rage then, so focusing on 2D and large amounts of enemies was somewhat novel." Highly inspired by classic shoot-'em-ups such as *SmashTV* and *Robotron*, *Crimsonland* was their first release in the genre that would eventually become synonymous with the studio, even before 10tons had been officially founded as a company.

In addition to the novelty of the genre, Töyssy also cites the widespread standardisation of built-in 3D accelerators in PCs as a factor in *Crimsonland*'s popularity. "It became possible to create a top-down shooter with thousands of enemies on screen. Once expensive and an enthusiast product, they suddenly were standard on all PCs." *Crimsonland*'s gory gunplay and endless horde of bugs might appear a little simple by today's standards, but it was enough to put its developers on the map.

"We basically made it for fun," Alatalo says of the game's humble origins. "We were all students at the time, and not exactly rolling in money, so seeing even modest amounts of money pour in was very encouraging." Initially, though, *Crimsonland* was released online as freeware – not an uncommon route for amateur developers then, and one that worked well to get the game into people's hands. For this cohort of university friends, taking the step onto the commercial path required the involvement of another, more seasoned Finnish development house.

Situated some 110 miles south of Tampere, in Helsinki, was Remedy Entertainment. The studio had just released *Max Payne 2* when that game's lead designer happened upon a certain online shooter. "Petri Järvilehto had spotted the freeware version and for some reason decided to contact me," Alatalo recalls. "He suggested that with a little bit of effort, we could actually make some money with the game."

With Järvilehto's experienced tutelage, 10tons established itself as a registered company and
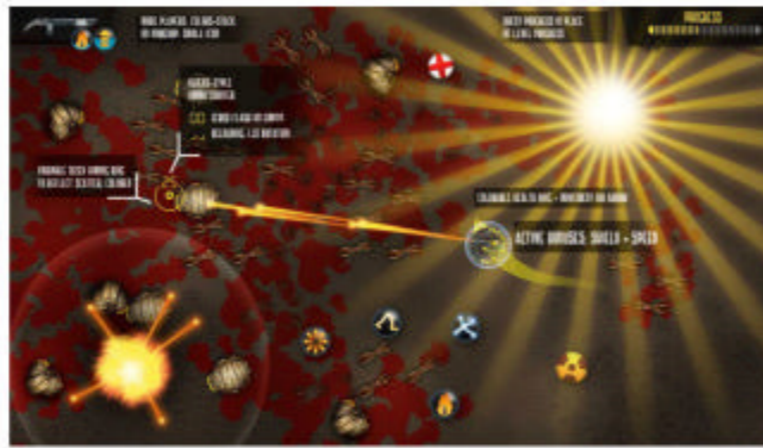
After being circulated on PC as freeware, *Crimsonland* would be re-released on all sorts of consoles, from PS3 to Switch

immediately started work on developing a paid-for version of its cult hit. *Crimsonland*'s core was left relatively untouched, but the scope of the game was drastically expanded with new modes, perks, weapons and difficulty levels. The only lingering question was how 10tons could sell a downloadable game on PC. The global digital distribution platforms that make this easy for everyone nowadays didn't exist at the time. At this point, Steam had only just emerged into the world, and its Greenlight service was still the best part of a decade away.

grown up alongside. In 2004, it formed a sub-brand, GameGekko (now MythPeople), dedicated to making casual games, and produced well over a dozen titles in this space. With names such as *Bubblefish Bob* and *Sparkle*, these releases ranged from endless runners to match-three puzzle games, and a couple of titles that bear a striking resemblance to *Angry Birds*. To reach as wide an audience as possible, as well as being released on PC these games were released for every mobile format going – not just Android and iOS, which were then just in the ascendancy, but precursors such as BlackBerry, Symbian and Samsung's Bada OS.

As a way of reaching new players, it proved a major success. In 2007, the studio moved to

STEAM HAD ONLY JUST EMERGED, AND ITS GREENLIGHT SERVICE WAS STILL THE BEST PART OF A DECADE AWAY

"Järvilehto introduced us to a Californian company called Reflexive, who were just about to launch their downloadable game arcade," Alatalo says. "[Reflexive] decided to take a risk with us, so we signed a deal, and about a year later the commercial version of the game was launched with their new Reflexive Arcade service." By 2006, it became one of the largest portals for downloadable games on the Internet, featuring more than 450 titles geared specifically towards casual players, especially those aged 30+. One of those, bucking the casual trend once again, was *Crimsonland*. "Getting the game published on Reflexive Arcade was quite easy from our perspective," Alatalo says. "Could making games be this easy? We've now learned that no, it's not easy, but I guess we're still on the same mission, just making games."

With *Crimsonland* firmly in the rear-view mirror (at least until its third launch in 2014, this time on modern consoles), 10tons decided it was time to try and tap into the lucrative market it had

an office closer to the heart of Tampere. Over the years since, it has steadily expanded to a team of ten people, enabling it to stay nimble and turn games around relatively quickly without compromising on quality. Something that has always defined the studio is a willingness to adapt, in the hope of staying ahead of the industry curve. In 2013, this led the studio from mobile and PC onto a relatively new handheld, launched by Sony the previous year.

"PS Vita was a great stepping stone into the console world," Töyssy explains. "It was also interesting in the sense that the hardware was quite modest. We had to cut some corners to make the games run on the device, as many cell phones overtook it quickly in CPU and GPU power." This was made easier by 10tons' experience developing for multiple platforms – the studio had designed its engine with an eye to porting, something it continued to build on. "Our internal tech made a big leap, as now we were supporting PC, mobile and console with the same game code. We pretty quickly started ▶
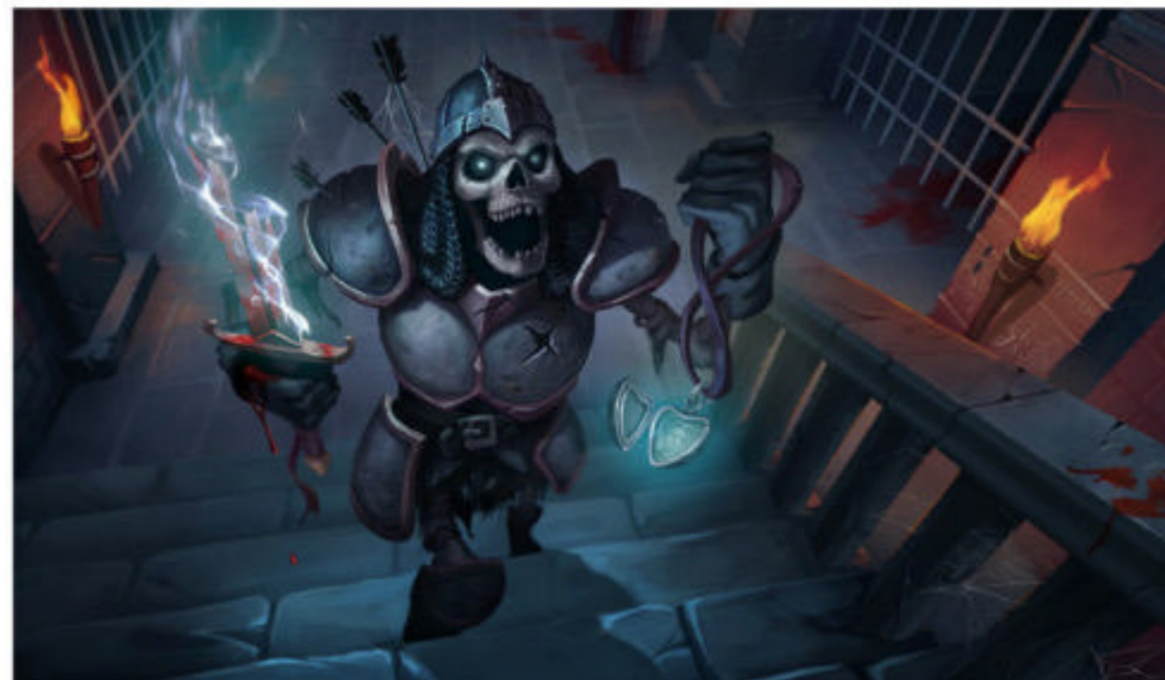
Though portrayed from a traditional top-down perspective, 2021's *Skeletal Avenger* is indicative of 10tons' enthusiasm to evolve as a studio. Instead of being another classically styled shoot-'em-up, it has a Roguelike structure and gratifying hack-and-slash combat

releasing on PS3 and PS4 as well." Does Töyssy have fond memories of working with the infamous PS3 devkit? "It weighed a ton and was rack-mountable," he says with a laugh. "We had to have one dedicated desk for it."

The move to console development was accompanied by a shift in focus in the kinds of games 10tons was making. "The games are more midcore to hardcore when compared with our casual/mobile era," Töyssy reflects. "I think the target audience is more similar to us personally, as we play a lot on PCs and consoles and not that much on mobile. Maybe it has shifted a bit, too, on a personal level. I used to play a lot on mobile when it was a new thing, but I rarely do it today." Perhaps even more importantly, this brought the studio back to the genre with which it had first made its name.

It was good timing, given that fellow Finnish studio Housemarque announced its retirement from the shoot-'em-up genre in 2017. In its absence, 10tons built a reputation as the unofficial home of top-down shooters with a more indie-centric, experimental spin. The idea was to focus on tight shooting mechanics, a satisfying and reliable constant which could be applied to a broad variety of themes – an approach that produced a host of modest hits for 10tons.

It's these games that you're most likely to associate with the studio. *Neon Chrome* casts you as a cybernetically enhanced operative in environments that are procedurally generated, highly destructible and, of course, garishly lit. *Jydge* draws clear inspiration from (though remains legally distinct to) the 2000AD comic strip of a similar name. *Tesla Vs Lovecraft* is even more upfront about its influences, equipping the inventor with death rays and a mech suit as he faces down the creatures of cosmic horror.

With such a variety of themes, we wonder what pitch meetings at 10tons are like. "It has

varied a lot throughout the years," Töyssy explains. "At first it was mostly informal discussion and random ideas, when it was just Tero [Alatalo], me and a couple of others. After that we moved into a prototyping-oriented approach. We thought we could fill in the marketing at a later phase if we internally liked a prototype." That has changed in recent years. "We try making something major light up in the customer's head when they first see the logo, the box art, the name and the first screenshots. So it has changed, but at least we're making new mistakes and successes when taking different approaches."

Just as it might have seemed that 10tons' identity was pinned down, though, the studio

"WE TRY MAKING SOMETHING MAJOR LIGHT UP IN THE CUSTOMER'S HEAD WHEN THEY FIRST SEE THE LOGO"

made another of its shifts in focus. With the release of *Undead Horde*, the company followed in Housemarque's footsteps and changed tack, delivering a game that is played with twin-stick controls but is built as more of a strategy hack-and-slash hybrid.

While this is certainly in line with 10tons' well-established unwillingness to stand still, we have to ask: why the sudden move away from the style of game it had, on and off, been honing for the best part of two decades? "We felt that we had explored the twin-stick shooter space enough, and that it maybe set some limits on the audience we could reach," Töyssy says. "There are people who do not even know what a top-down twin-stick shooter is. That might be a bit limiting." It's worth noting that *Tesla Force*, a sequel to *Tesla Vs Lovecraft* and currently the

studio's final shoot-'em-up release, didn't seem to attract the same attention as its predecessor. Still, 10tons doesn't rule out working on twin-stick shooters entirely. "There's still a place for it if the games are scoped right, or if you do some kind of revolution which everyone wants to be part of," Töyssy says.

For now, though, the change seems to have once again paid off for 10tons. "*Dysmantle* is our biggest game to date in scope and sales," Töyssy says, referring to the post-apocalyptic survival title the studio released on PC in Early Access last year. "Just before it, *Undead Horde* broke our previous records." The latter game already has a

successor, in the form of hack-and-slash Roguelike *Skeletal Avenger*, which has itself just left Early Access. (This seems to be one of the trends 10tons is currently chasing – its past four games have enjoyed overlapping Early Access periods.)

And so 10tons finds itself at the dawn of a completely new era. A genre that was once a testbed for a swathe of ideas for the studio suddenly isn't. The team doesn't want to forget where it came from, but – with Alatalo and Töyssy keen to get back to the in-office atmosphere in Tampere – it has its sights set on projects of a type it hasn't tried before. Nothing is set in stone just yet, but Töyssy teases: "It would be great to make a financially and critically successful game with a multiplayer component." The next big change for this eternally restless studio, then, might already be in the works. ■

1 Unleash justice as a customised version of the titular future cop in *Jydge*.
2 *Tesla Vs Lovecraft* sees the former pilot a mech, which resulted in some interesting conceptual designs.
3 *Undead Horde* broke 10tons' sales records.
4 Despite appearances, *Dysmantle* has depth, but it's accessible. "We try to make games which are easy to learn and play," Töyssy says.
5 An early inspiration for *Crimsonland* was *Fallout*

NO.1 FOR PS5

THE NO.1 MAGAZINE FOR PLAYSTATION

PLAY

God Of War
Ragnarök

How Kratos is levelling up for the stunning final chapter of the Norse Saga

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Life Is Strange: True Colors
PS5
The *Wavelengths* prequel episode bridges the gap between Deck Nine's *Before The Storm* and the latest *Life Is Strange*, focusing on Steph Gingrich's role as Haven Springs' resident DJ. Her role entails a series of mundane activities: updating the playlist (playable records include the likes of Foals and Hot Chip), using a d20 to offer 'psychic' advice, and reading on-air ads. It's everything outside the job that makes it special: hilarious exchanges via a dating app, a moving reunion with an old Arcadia Bay friend as the pair reckon with the trauma of the first game's events, and an ending that fully validates our decision to romance Steph in the main game.

Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania
Switch
Probably the best *Super Monkey Ball* since the first two – largely because it basically *is* the first two, with a clutch of extras including the ability to play as Kazuma Kiryu or a Sega Saturn. Yet scandalously, it still doesn't get Monkey Target right. Somehow the original *still* remains undefeated.

Behind The Frame: The Finest Scenery
PC
We wouldn't say the time it takes us to finish this gentle story about a pair of painters is the best way to spend 72 minutes this month (not when Céline Sciamma's wonderful Petite Maman has an identical runtime), but even if parts of its script seem to have lost something in translation, this touchingly highlights the hidden meanings behind works of art, and how they can forge connections between strangers.

Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Let's push things forward?

Two entries in long-running series head up this month's Play section, and once again we're invited to consider the value of innovation versus the appeal of the familiar. The expectation is usually a bit of both. A series doesn't become beloved without first offering something new – but if innovation attracts an audience, the anticipation for a sequel is partly fuelled by the promise of what you enjoyed about the earlier game (or games) all over again.

Creators thus have a balance to strike: diverge too much from the original recipe, and you risk alienating those fans. Play it too safe, however, and you'll leave them wanting. It's fair to say one of the two games manages to fulfil its brief more thoroughly than the other. In some ways, *Metroid Dread* seems to have been developed in a bubble: it largely ignores developments in the wider genre since we previously got a brand-new 2D entry, but it delivers on both exploration and action, while introducing a terrifyingly persistent new threat that lends extra tension to Samus's search for answers (and health and missile upgrades, of course).

Far Cry 6, on the other hand, arrives with a promise of revolution on which it singularly fails to deliver. That sandbox template is looking wonkier than ever, and while there are new features and a fresh setting, the additions (such as the powerful 'supremo' backpacks) do little to paper over the cracks. By the time the credits have rolled, the prospect of a seventh is not an appealing one.

Beyond *Dread*, the best games of this month have one thing in common, though you wouldn't necessarily notice by looking at them. *Lemnis Gate*, *ElecHead* and *Unpacking* all explore a single idea so completely that sequels would appear to be surplus to requirements. Then again, could we honestly say we'd turn down the offer of more?

Metroid Dread

The *Metroid* games have never been ashamed of the influence of Alien. There's the hat-tip of Ridley's name, of course, while Yoshio Sakamoto has happily acknowledged the pop-cultural debt in interviews. But *Metroid Dread* might be the closest it has ever come to that inspiration, in the form of the game's biggest addition to this 35-year-old series: the EMMI.

As names go, it might not inspire quite the same fear as Xenomorph or Necronom. In pursuit, though, we find ourselves thinking of that line spoken by Ian Holm's Ash in the original film: "The perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility." They might not look much alike — in place of the dark chitin and troubling fluids, these are colourful robots with faces that open up like the petals of a flower — but there's something in the uncanny way they move. Without the mundane realities of a man in a rubber suit to worry about, the EMMI are able to deliver on the terrifying promise of Giger's design. The shape might be roughly humanoid, but in motion — the limbs bending freely in both directions, the segmented body stacking in new formations to navigate each ledge — they're anything but.

Your meetings with the EMMI vary, drawing on different aspects of this cinematic inspiration. Occasionally, when Samus is blessed with the (extremely time-limited) Omega Cannon, you get to play out the space-marine fantasies of Aliens, emptying round after glowing round into the creature as it treads towards you. But more often encounters resemble that iconic shot from Alien 3, with the xenomorph's face right up against Ripley's. Samus, disguised by a new cloaking ability, stands perfectly still, the EMMI's beam of vision scanning her up and down at point-blank range — until, finally, your prayers are answered and the EMMI turns to scuttle off in the other direction. Or perhaps it doesn't, and instead pounces, and you find yourself skewered on the spike that emerges from its maw. But the incarnation that *Dread* resembles most, we'd suggest, comes from outside cinema: the survival horror of Creative Assembly's *Alien: Isolation*. As in that game, you're pursued by an unpredictable, unstoppable enemy, able to take shortcuts through the levels that, contrary to the usual rules of *Metroid*, never become accessible to Samus. And if it catches up to you, well — game over, man. Game over.

Dread never steps over the line into outright horror, however, opting instead for long stretches of stomach-tightening tension that never quite dissipates. The second or two it takes for a charge-beam door to complete its opening animation is as agonising the final time as it was the first. And it's hard not to sweat knowing that your cloak is draining power, each moment ticking closer to the one when you must choose between eschewing invisibility and letting the ability eat away at your health.

This sustained tension can be attributed, at least in part, to the sparing way in which Sakamoto and

The Switch hardware brings new fidelity to architecture and iconography that has long been chiselled into the memory
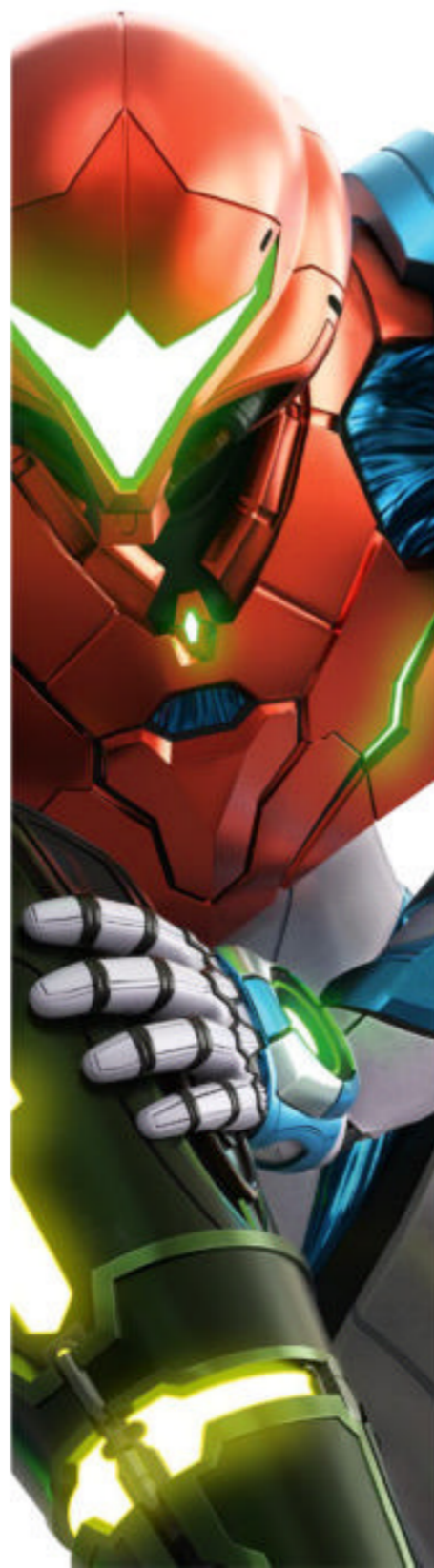
MercurySteam deploy their monster. Or *monsters*, rather — the game tells you early on that you're sharing this planet with seven EMMI. Vitally, each is confined to its own zone within *Dread*'s map, through which Samus must pass on her way to objectives. Entering one of these zones, you know the rules of engagement are about to change, until you reach an exit and, beyond, safety.

Relatively speaking, anyway. What lies outside these zones is a traditional sprawling *Metroid* map, with plenty of dangers of its own. This makes up the bulk of the game, at least in geographic terms, and while it's tempting to describe everything that happens here as 'business as usual' — there is certainly a strong throughline of continuity, mechanically and narratively (see 'X-position dump', p102) — it's worth considering just how long it has been since business *was* last usual.

Compared to Samus' previous outing, on 3DS (or Wii, depending on which games in the series you choose to ignore; for the hardcore, it was arguably Game Boy Advance), the Switch hardware is a powerhouse, bringing new fidelity to architecture and iconography that has long been chiselled into the memory. There's a greater sense of scale, as the camera pulls back to show Samus dwarfed by her surroundings or the arrival of a boss creature, and the odd exquisite environmental detail. The wildlife that scatters as you approach; movements in a background layer foretelling your next big encounter — its one big idea aside, in these moments *Dread* truly does feel like a *Metroid* game made for today.

The biggest update, though, comes in the form of Samus herself. While the majority of her abilities and items will be familiar — the morph ball, grapple beam, screw attack and more all make appearances — they're attached to a faster, more agile version of the character. Samus has never been one of Nintendo's more elegant mascots, lacking the easy elasticity of Mario, the contextual readiness of Link, and that's still the case, with some manoeuvres requiring minor contortion of the hands on the controls — but there's a fresh speed to her movements that more than makes up for it.

That speed seems to be the primary thrust behind *Dread*'s few additions to Samus' abilities. Flash Shift is a dash move that can be chained three times in a row, letting you cross entire screens without touching the ground. The Spider Magnet lets Samus cling to walls and ceilings (at least, those coated in the appropriate blue material) to reach difficult spots. These need to be unlocked, but right from the start you're equipped with an *Other M*-inspired slide move that can be used to duck through the kind of gaps that normally require balling up. It might take a little to get Samus going but once she's built momentum, there's rarely any need to stop.

This all goes hand in hand with *Dread*'s counter system, another element first introduced in *Other M*, ▶

RIGHT The repeating mini-boss battles with Chozo warriors are a good way of reminding you how far Samus's abilities – and your own, potentially – have come. **MAIN** Escaping the clutches of an EMMI is possible, but it's not something to ever rely on. In truth, if you're seeing one this close up, it's probably goodnight. **BOTTOM** There are some wonderfully unusual enemy designs to encounter here, even if the EMMI rather hogs the spotlight
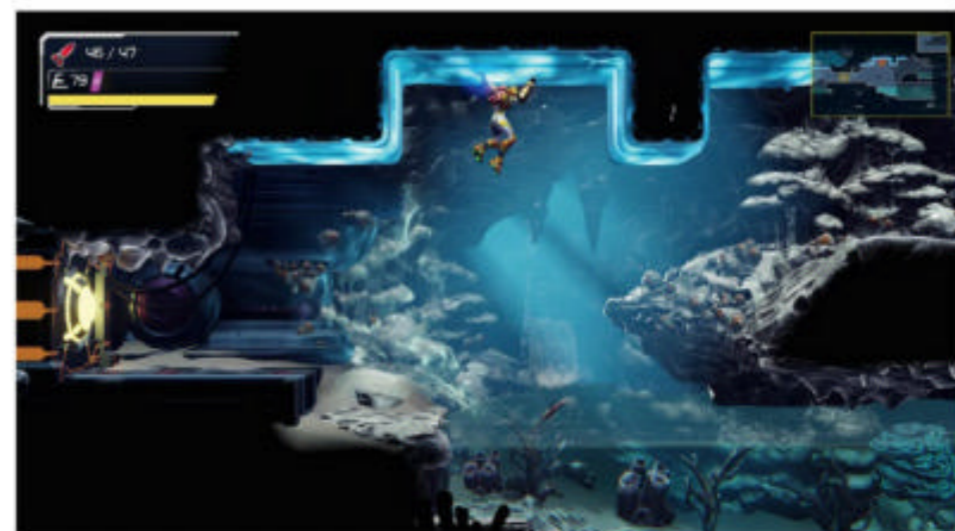
ABOVE The Spider Magnet ability, new to Samus's repertoire, is useful not only for reaching new areas but also for dodging EMMI patrols – at which point magnetised movement feels like a torturously slow crawl

then applied to 2D in MercurySteam's *Samus Returns*. Certain enemy attacks are accompanied by a brief flash of light; a timely response will see them rebuffed, opening them up for a powerful follow-up attack that yields more health and missile ammo. The same button can be hit on the move, too, to unleash a kind of speedy Shoryuken — albeit one that's more useful for buying a quiet moment than for dealing damage. The counter really comes into its own when facing *Dread*'s most fearsome foes. It can be used as a final Hail Mary when caught by an EMMI, though the required timing shifts, leaving the outcome in the hands of the gods as much as your own reflexes.

Most of the game's boss encounters are built around countering opportunities too, triggering flashily animated sequences during which you're free to hammer the shoot button as much as you like. (With bosses lacking visible health bars, as is series tradition, it's hard to tell how much these sequences actually contribute, but they certainly *feel* essential to victory.) These battles, one of the two major obstacles to progress that *Dread* puts in your path, are firmly of the pattern-learning variety. They're beautifully satisfying once mastered, as you skip past entire attack phases that previously left Samus in shreds, but it can be an uphill struggle to internalise the Simon Says logic of each wind-up animation and its correct response. The final encounter, in particular, is a solid wall, throwing wave after wave of attacks your way to test how well you've learned to contort around *Dread*'s entire library of manoeuvres.

Remarkably, though, even after a few hours butting up against it, this boss never quite feels unfair — to us, at least. That could be the sweet revisionism of victory talking, true, but we'd rather attribute it to the moment

X-POSITION DUMP
The *Metroid* series has always upheld a tightly serialised narrative, at least by Nintendo standards, and *Dread* is no exception. As you might expect from a game presented as the saga's grand finale, it's thick with returning story elements: X parasites; Chozo lore; Samus' Metroid-infused DNA; even Adam, the AI incarnation of Other M's least-admired character. Still, newcomers shouldn't feel too lost. The game opens with a comprehensive 'previously on', in the style that's been used since *Super Metroid*, and while the plot's twists and turns do build on what has come before, it's all easy enough to follow. The same can't be said of the game's opening cutscene, though, which somehow takes the classic 'Samus arrives on planet, faces unbeatable foe, loses powers' setup and turns it into a confusing, non-linear jumble.

Bosses have an incredible sense of scale, intimidating you from the very beginning of a fight. This battle, with a fettered Kraid, begins at eye level before the floor drops out, leaving you to deal with its exposed stomach

when, bloodied and reeling from yet another defeat, we first glimpse the design rationale behind this difficulty spike. It's a brutal encouragement to go back one last time and scour the entire map, now fully prised open, for any hidden upgrades it has to spare. Which brings us to the other, less welcome ways *Dread* stalls progress: its navigational challenges. Occasionally, the way forward will be obscured, leaving us running a finger across every surface looking for a crack. That's to be expected — this is *Metroid*, after all — but too often the solution is frustratingly petty. More than once, progression is locked behind a single destructible block, indistinguishable from its indestructible kin until you happen to land a missile on the exact spot.

These are thankfully rare stoppages in a game that, much like its hero and its monster, is best in motion. It might be counter to the fantasy on which this genre is built (see Post Script) but *Dread* is actually at its best when shepherding the player, leaving just enough agency to ensure you don't realise that's what is happening. You're guided seamlessly from a headlong rush across the map into careful exploration of its darkest corners, into the drawn-out tension of an EMMI encounter, into the fight with a tough boss who you can, at least, face head-on. All of these elements lock together so well that a newcomer might struggle to tell which one had been grafted on anew. A perfect organism? Not quite, but in its finest stretches *Dread* has a momentum that can mesmerise for hours at a time. It's hard to look away from the screen — even when, in moments that reach towards full horror, you might want to.

8

Post Script

Has Metroid been left behind by the genre it essentially founded?

For the purposes of review, we've taken *Metroid* in isolation (and, indeed, in *Isolation*). And in those terms, *Dread* is a great success, a series update with just enough ideas and polish of its own. But that means ignoring the wider context in which these games exist, and what happened to it while Samus was enjoying a 17-year cryosleep between 2D adventures. Consider it this way: when *Zero Mission* came out in 2004, it was on the eve of *Cave Story*'s release. This was five years before *Shadow Complex* brought the genre to the nascent Xbox Live Arcade, more than a decade before *Axiom Verge*, and the indie Metroidvania explosion that followed.

Today, then, Samus competes not just with the Belmont bloodline but with Ori and Shantae, luchadors and steambots, The Penitent One and The Knight. Many of these newer Metroidvania games are not just slavish recreations of the genre's principles but significant expansions. And *Dread* seems uninterested in the lot.

There are a few concessions to modernity found in its map screen: each variety of door and block (once exposed) is labelled to show whether you have what is needed to pass it; areas that still contain some secret to be uncovered flash intermittently; and there are colour-coded markers for you to use as you wish. But the territory represented by that map — ZDR, the world you are here to explore — feels stubbornly old-fashioned.

Going back to play *Super Metroid* after completing *Dread*, it's clear where the preoccupation with single hidden blocks comes from. Both games like to seal you off in an area with only one exit. Extra goodies, meanwhile, are hidden either in plain sight or at the end of long paths that lead only to that point. Sequence breaking is possible, as it has been in *Metroid*s past, but for the most part *Dread*'s map is a funnel, albeit often a very wide one. Once we accept that, it becomes a perfectly satisfying shape, and we're swept along by its momentum. But it does take a while for our expectations to adjust.

Those expectations can probably be put down to one game that worked so hard to explore this genre: *Hollow Knight*. Hallownest always feels porous, with new pathways and shortcuts opening organically. By comparison, ZDR's map feels as though it has been tunnelled through at very specific points. We never find ourselves surprised by where we've ended up — those lovely full-circle *Hollow Knight* moments when two points you'd previously thought of as miles distant are suddenly, in the crumbling of a wall, connected.

In part, this is presumably the result of technical limitations, bearing in mind the greater fidelity of *Dread*'s world. ZDR is broken up into discrete zones, the boundaries between them breached at very specific

> Sequence breaking is possible, as it has been in Metroids past, but for the most part Dread's map is a funnel

points: calling points for elevators and trams that rationalise loading screens as travel time. But it's more a question of design philosophy. It's worth remembering that at least some of the authorship of *Dread* belongs to developers who were once fans of the series. With *Samus Returns* and, before that, a trio of *Castlevania* games, the team at MercurySteam have demonstrated that they are avid students of both halves of that awkward genre portmanteau. And so, playing *Dread* is an education in what they personally value about the old games — something we recently found ourselves thinking about while playing *Axiom Verge 2*. In both cases, we're left with the impression of the kind of player who was always keen to get the graph paper out and start mapping.

The thrill of navigation here is almost the exact inverse of the one we identified in *Hollow Knight* — two points that seem very close but that turn out to be far apart. We think of morph-ball tunnels beneath our feet, accessing which requires exiting this zone and re-entering via a teleportal elsewhere that leads to a closed loop of level, tucked away inside the one in which we started. It's clever level design, for sure, but of a very specific, mechanical variety. There are habits picked up from other games in the genre that *Dread* forces us to shake. For example, if you bump up against a tough boss — at least, until the final one — there's probably not much point searching high and low for items that'll help you beat it. Attempts only serve to get us lost, with maybe one quarter of an energy tank upgrade to show for our efforts. Much better to bear down and learn those attack patterns.

That habit, in particular, can be traced back to another important thing to happen to the Metroidvania during those cryosleep years: *Dark Souls*. FromSoft's games are a mutant strain of the genre, adapting its pleasures in ways that have subsequently fed back into more traditional Metroidvanias. We do briefly wonder if *Souls* is one influence that has been allowed to bleed into *Dread*, given the cranked-up tension and the simple difficulty of its boss fights. But if so, this is all that it borrows. Where *Hollow Knight* blended hard (ability gating) and soft (skill check) barriers to progress, *Dread* is only really interested in the former. Which is, to borrow an old line, Samus it ever was.

Maybe it's unfair to make the comparison in the first place: should birthing a genre make you responsible for its growth? But these habits and expectations are ones we can't help but bring to the game. We didn't spend all those years in cryosleep — and chances are, neither did you. Approach it with that in mind, and there's a brilliant *Metroid* game to be found here. Even if it does nothing to push the broader genre forward. ■

Far Cry 6

The promo push for *Far Cry 6* has been at pains to emphasise that its antagonist, Antón Castillo, is empathetic and complex. That's fortunate, because we wouldn't have noticed otherwise. Ubisoft means business with its latest bad guy, bringing in Giancarlo Esposito to play Castillo, clearly hoping the character can match the actor's reputation for nuance. What we get is reheated Gus Fring, scooped into the uniform of a brutal dictator, but also an oddly minor presence, confined to occasional cutscenes and radio speeches. Especially after *Deathloop*'s efforts to pull its main adversary into its game space, Esposito's involvement feels clumsily traditional.

It's indicative of a game with conservative priorities, offering charismatic personalities and the splendour of a nation as cover for creaky infrastructure. To a degree, it works — protagonist Dani Rojas is a decent lead, and the varied guerrilla factions she (or he) aims to unite provide enthusiastic support. Their homeland, the Cuba-inspired Yara, is more impressive still. Copy-paste checkpoints and air-defence bases are well spread, making room for a surprising number of bespoke factories, TV stations, hotels and pipelines that grease the wheels of Castillo's regime. Each feels like it's been placed with purpose, as do the contours of mountain trails, rivers and cave networks.

That almost seems like too much effort, however, for a game that's otherwise so leaden-footed. Not much distinguishes *Far Cry 6* from its own history, or even that of *Assassin's Creed*. From fishing and legendary animal hunts to checkpoint raids and resource grinding, the closest it gets to a unique identity is in shedding any last vestige of realism, underlined early on as you pal up with a crocodile in a sports jacket. Yes, as ever, you can improvise great self-directed action-film vignettes, winning a machine-gun fight against a helicopter from atop a telecom tower, then diving off with James Bond nonchalance, opening your wingsuit to glide to safety. Yet our stay in Yara produces far more stories in which our creative efforts slam against dated limitations.

Indeed, the island feels less magical whenever it stops being scenery and becomes the scene of events. Its depiction of civil war is a Truman Show-style loop that creaks into gear as you approach. We regularly spot lone soldiers standing at the roadside about to shoot a single hostage. Minor skirmishes break out at checkpoints we've commandeered, always exactly after we arrive (often destroying the vehicle we'd planned to borrow). Filled with such paper-thin constructs, Yara is barely worth exploring ad hoc, something the game concedes when it unlocks fast-travel points in areas you've yet to visit.

Far Cry 6, then, is about the destinations — intricate structures ripe for infiltration — not the journey. If only the ineptitude of the enemy didn't detract from their potential. After triggering an alarm, we casually spy on soldiers' routines as they search in the wrong places. We watch snipers stuck in Sisyphean loops, ascending and

It comes back to priorities: rather than fix the foundations, Ubisoft would rather distract us with shiny toys

WET WORK
Far Cry 6's campaign can be played in twoplayer co-op mode, but if you have a friend handy we'd recommend taking time to dip into the game's co-op-tailored 'special operations' once they unlock (two are available at launch, with more to come). These take place on large, enclosed maps and ask you to retrieve a well-guarded volatile radioactive device, then escape with it in hand. Once removed from its container, however, the device will quickly overheat and explode, so the player carrying it must keep to the shade and find sources of water to cool it down. The combination of these tactical considerations and open locations – including a kind of mock Jurassic Park – is more engaging than anything else in the game.

descending ladders; a procession of guards jogging right by us towards a hacked computer, leaving themselves vulnerable; even a few trained assassins lobbing grenades at their own feet. And the less said about their driving skills, the better. In one sequence we're the gunner on a military speedboat. Our driver crashes into the shore. When we complete the mission, a random helicopter plummets into the sea. We decide to hop in the back of our compadre's truck for a lift — he drives along the road a little then veers into a pond.

Previous *Far Cry* games may have had similar issues, but shouldn't we expect better by now? Certainly when they affect our progress, as in the occasions when we're forced to reload a checkpoint as key NPCs stand unresponsive, or we spend five minutes sneaking around a compound only for our AI partner to open fire. But also, less quantifiably, all the logic holes hamper our attempts to enjoy ourselves. In one mission we scale a crane towering over a base, high above sightline. Somehow we get spotted, and somehow a grenade lands at our feet. Later we note how enemies don't even flinch if we shoot them as they climb a ladder, a scenario *Metal Gear Solid V* managed with slapstick proficiency six years ago.

It comes back to priorities: rather than fix the foundations, Ubisoft would rather distract us with shiny toys. A gear system replaces skill trees, with each wearable item bestowing a specific perk. You can also kit out individual guns with different ammo types, scopes and silencers, or charge up back-mounted 'supremo' weapons, including a homing rocket launcher and area-of-effect flame blasters. But these aren't refined systems, they're things piled on things. Switching guns because one soldier in a squad is resistant to your current ammo is pure fuss, and the rare resources required to make each alteration means there's scant incentive to experiment.

Besides, regardless of loadout, we can't fend off the spectre of repetition for long. Sneaking or killing your way into a building is the same in practice whether it's a chemical weapons factory or a library, and the only real challenge is dealing with swarms of reinforcements. A few respite quests, in which you deface posters or organise a party, are flimsy sticking plasters on a campaign that trundles on, oblivious of its diminishing returns.

Far Cry 6 is thus an exercise in banality, despite its vibrant landscapes and characters. But then perhaps, given their parallels with Cuban history, even they ultimately make it worse. It hits us in an early mission, as we charge around a tobacco plantation with a flamethrower, torching crops and soldiers to the tune of Bella Ciao. Hearing that anthem of resistance in a game so unwilling to take risks feels a little sad. We didn't expect Ubisoft to revolutionise open-world gaming with *Far Cry 6*, but it might at least have given us the sense that it believes change is possible.

5

LEFT Tanks and helicopters are a constant threat in heavily guarded areas, unless you can get to them first and take them out – or, better still, capture them to use yourself. **BELOW** Horses that you can ride are a new addition to the series, but they're so skittish it's often best to stick to motorised vehicles. **MAIN** The game delivers the kind of sights expected from the series, but we also get occasional screen tearing and, inexplicably, a juddering framerate in cutscenes

ABOVE Cockfighting, a bloodsport that's banned in many countries, including the UK and US, is presented as a bit of harmless fun, and takes the form of a sanitised versus fighter minigame. It's… different, at least

The political impetus of Dani's revolution comes from Libertad's leader Clara García, but we never learn much about her

Post Script

Far Cry 6's timid political perspective does a disservice to players and real-world struggles

We feel real anticipation as we hike through thick jungle to meet *Far Cry 6*'s 'Legends Of '67', guided by the voice of El Tigre, Yara's answer to Che Guevara. He's an original character, of course, but the game's inclusion of an aging Che analogue is potentially fascinating — an opportunity to consider the political evolution (or not) of survivors of communist revolutions past. Yet in person El Tigre is merely a big personality spoiling for a new fight, and the only debate in his camp is whether his old comrades have the stomach to join him. He looks the part, complete with beret and cigar, but he's not so much Che as a Che T-shirt.

The question of politics has hung heavily over *Far Cry 6* since its unveiling, and it's impossible not to snag on it in the final offering. In May, narrative director Navid Khavari wrote a blog post clarifying that, obviously, the game's story was political, if not specifically about Cuba, and it would feature "hard, relevant discussions" about a range of political subjects. He also explained that the development team had sought the perspectives of ex-revolutionaries, as well as various experts to ensure "sensitivity". So why does *Far Cry 6* seem to go out of its way to say nothing of real consequence?

Dani Rojas's revolution is less a political endeavour than pure adventurism. Yes, it's clear that Castillo needs overthrowing — he relies on forced labour to produce his cancer drug, Viviro, and conducts horrific experiments on the poor. But the only strong theme running through Dani's efforts is the danger she might get addicted to the process. It's the same with most of the would-be guerrillas she recruits. Young or old, deep down they're all hot-blooded warriors, enjoying their killing as much as their partying, but light on manifestoes.

In this way, *Far Cry 6* turns Latin cultures into a fetish, romantically offering up a nation of spirited outlaws, free from our everyday grind. Yara becomes a site of nostalgia for a time when grassroots change could come from the barrel of a gun, refuge taken in militarism for want of difficult answers to hard questions. The story skates over Latin American history, not least how, after Cuba, many left-wing revolutions were throttled by fascist coups and regimes with US state support. More conspicuously, it omits any significant nod to the creative, alternative forms of resistance the region has fostered — landless workers' movements, cooperatives, liberation theology, feminist movements, and so on. In Yara, you're a guerrilla fighter or a nobody.

At most it ponders potential frictions. Paolo is the young trans leader of protest group Máximas Matanzas. He's conflicted, knowing that, even after Castillo, Yaran culture won't accept him. But *Far Cry 6* doesn't dwell on such issues, and ultimately evades the question of what comes after the revolution. It also sidesteps many moral quandaries, such as when it asks us to incorporate depleted uranium and napalm — virtually synonymous with imperialism and brutality — into our arsenal. These and many other scenarios are open goals to consider the texture of political change, but there's no intellectual presence to raise them. The brains of our operation is Juan Cortez, a tactician whose guerrilla rules include gems such as "Fucked-Up Situations Call For Fucked-Up Solutions."

Perhaps we're at fault for expecting anything else from *Far Cry 6* (we're a long way from *Far Cry 2* by now). Certainly, it's difficult to imagine how weighty themes could survive amid tens of hours of mindlessly gunning down soldiers and helicopters. But then why start down the road of real-world parallels and research at all, if not to frame our actions with their gravity? Instead, our adventure stops at allusions to the evils of fascism, the need for democracy, equal rights and ending forced labour. A far cry from hard discussion. ■

Back 4 Blood

Back 4 Blood is a Faustian pact, the gift of a devil risen from the earth like one of the game's own bullet-sponge bosses. Of course you can have Left 4 Dead back, the devil begins. Here it is with the classic trimmings: four players fighting from saferoom to saferoom against regular zombies and superpowered Special infected; beeping pipebombs to lure the crowds away; desperate mid-scrum revivals; enemy spawning that functions like a personality test, with dawdlers pinioned by creatures they can't fight off alone. Back 4 Blood's desiccated United States burns brighter than Left 4 Dead's twilit post-apocalypse, with colour choices that recall the developer's ill-fated Evolve, but it strikes a familiar balance between archetypal spaces and twisty, Half-Life-2-era corridor design: malls and sewers, worrying hedge mazes, giddy paths of scaffolding over packed streets, and tumbledown arenas where you keep the undead company till a door finishes opening.

It sounds like everything a fan of Turtle Rock's 2008 reputation-maker could dream of. But there's a price, the devil adds, and the price is very simply: more. Not just more guns per category, but a generous sprinkling of scopes, barrels, stocks and magazines governed by a rarity system, with stat differences filling the screen as you pick through the loot crates that litter this undead world. A copper currency to spend on posher firearms in saferooms reminiscent of The Division's outposts, with NPCs who talk to the air while you decide whether you need an Epic laser sight more than an Uncommon Molotov cocktail. A suite of power-up cards such as +2 health recovery per machete kill, sorted into decks of 15 and slowly unlocked over the course of each run.

To fit in these additions, the devil goes on, you will need to spend a bit more time outside the game proper, sifting menus full of greyed-out item portraits and wandering a hub fortress where prepper admins badger you to spend Supply Points on themed unlock trees. And to justify them, you need a challenge factor that often favours attrition and gear optimisation over the lightning breakthroughs and reversals of the 2008 game. Because all this, the devil concludes, is what it takes for Left 4 Dead to exist today. It's not enough to be a brilliantly limber exercise in teamwork and betrayal, moderated by the AI equivalent of Saruman gloating through his Palantir. The Game-As-Service gods must have their due, and the result is a solid homage coated in Destiny-style careerism — slickly made and certainly not lacking for moving parts, but the magic isn't quite there.

The joy of Left 4 Dead is that, given a degree of familiarity with shooters and horror cinema, everything happens in the moment. The Special Infected are named for what they do. Weapons dictate roles — shotguns to the front of the queue, please. Mood is conjured not through backstory but by way of sightlines, shadows

Developer Turtle Rock
Publisher Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series (version tested)
Release Out now

For all the additions, there are some painful omissions: no splitscreen, no PvP campaign

INSECTS AND VIOLENCE
In place of Left 4 Dead's old PvP you get Swarm, in which teams of four alternate defending and attacking sealed-off parts of campaign maps as humans and Ridden, unlocking ability cards, traits and buffs over three rounds. Matches have a warm-up period in which humans scrounge guns while invisible Ridden players position themselves for the perfect ambush. As the timer runs on, the playable area is slowly engulfed by ravenous insects, shrinking to a few metres wide. It's a nice break from co-op but not a patch on Left 4 Dead's campaign Versus, in which you'd fight tooth and claw over whole levels. The limitations of the Ridden monster concepts are also more pressing here – it's fun to bound over the geometry as the Stalker, but the Tallboy is just a shambling button-masher with an optional grab.

and the psychological undertow of iconic American settings. The levels discreetly encourage you to roleplay classic zombie movie moments of self-interest and self-sacrifice. All that exists somewhere in Back 4 Blood, but it's burdened by the new career structures. Among the first things you'll see are a brace of Forza-style montages about personalisation, foregrounding the game as a content platform. The pressure to work out which gun is best ruins the rhythm and drags you out of the world. And for all the additions, there are some painful omissions: no splitscreen, no PvP campaign, and nothing as terrifying as an unseen, sobbing Witch.

The new Special Infected — or Ridden, as they're known here — are Back 4 Blood's biggest letdowns. It's partly that they're just louder remixes of Left 4 Dead's headline acts, with ideas from the sequel stirred in as "mutated" alternative ability sets. The bilious, horde-attracting Boomer returns as the Reeker, available in acid-spewing or kamikaze variations. The Hunter is now the Stalker, configurable to hawk paralysing goop from a ledge or drag players away Jockey-style. The Witch has become the Hag, who swallows people and legs it after the example of Gears 5's Snatcher. Least convincing is the Tall Boy — Left 4 Dead 2's Charger without the charge move that threw each level's geometry into sharp relief, built simply to smash players or crush them.

More problematic than what the Ridden are, however, is the unscientific way they're hurled at you, sometimes spawning in plain view, their signature audio stings lost in a deluge of guts and combat chatter. Too often, Back 4 Blood takes a cat-and-mouse format and turns it into a meat grinder — especially when it comes to Ogre and Breaker bosses, whose mammoth health bars place yet more emphasis on enhancing your gear. There's still that pressure to stick together and scan the rooftops, but rarely anything like the tension of being hounded by a single Smoker across an entire level.

Having said all this, it's sometimes the case with Back 4 Blood that more is more. If the power cards feel like intrusions, they stack up well enough against other games built around unlocks. Later cards allow pleasantly dicey trade-offs — carrying more ammo at the expense of stamina, for instance. There are also Corruption cards, automatically dealt between chapters. These raise the stakes with fancier zombie breeds and terrain variables such as fog or flocks of unhelpfully noisy crows. They work well because they're mods rather than extras, forcing you to rethink your tactics and appreciate the environments anew.

You could imagine a great Left 4 Dead sequel being built around such ideas. Back 4 Blood comes close at times, but it's weakened by established wisdom about what a blockbuster game needs. As homages go, it's reverential yet poisoned by doubt. It doesn't trust Left 4 Dead's genius enough to let it stand alone.

6

LEFT There's no overarching character progression in PvP or the co-op campaign beside power cards. Collected guns and activated cards last the length of a run.
BELOW Each of the four acts ends with a setpiece struggle. Some are about making it through alive, others see you gathering far-flung objects while batting off the horde.
MAIN The creature design recalls *Evolve*'s alien bosses, with more outlandish Ridden sprouting chitinous plates, extra limbs and headsacs full of explosive fluid
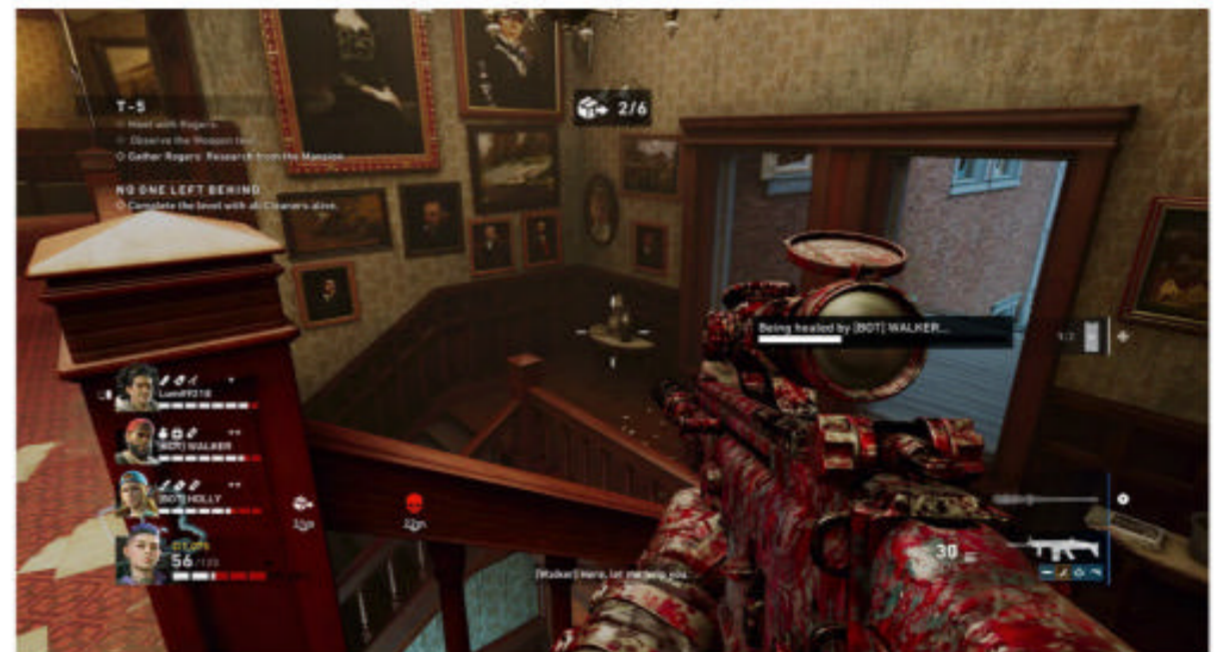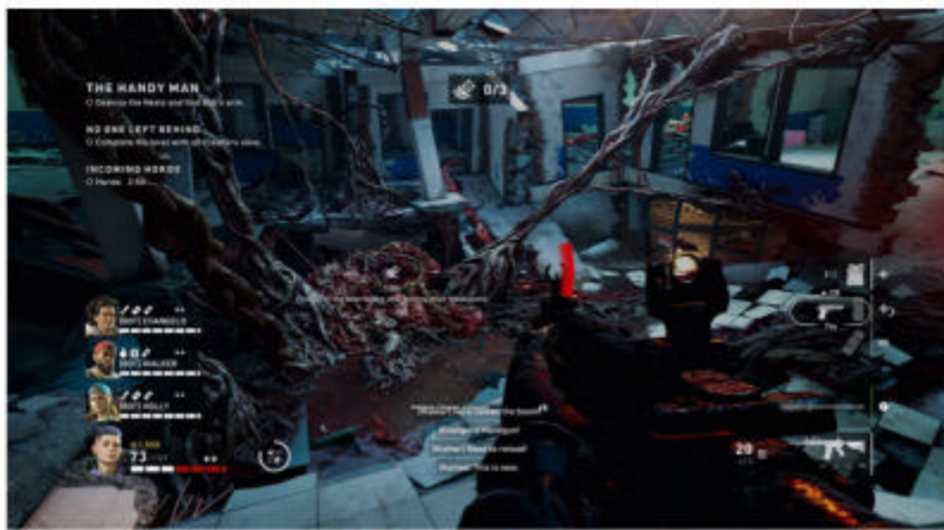
ABOVE Bots and other players can be rescued later in the level if they're killed – you'll have to free them from the sticky substance covering them. As a spectator, you can also jump into the body of any bot still upright
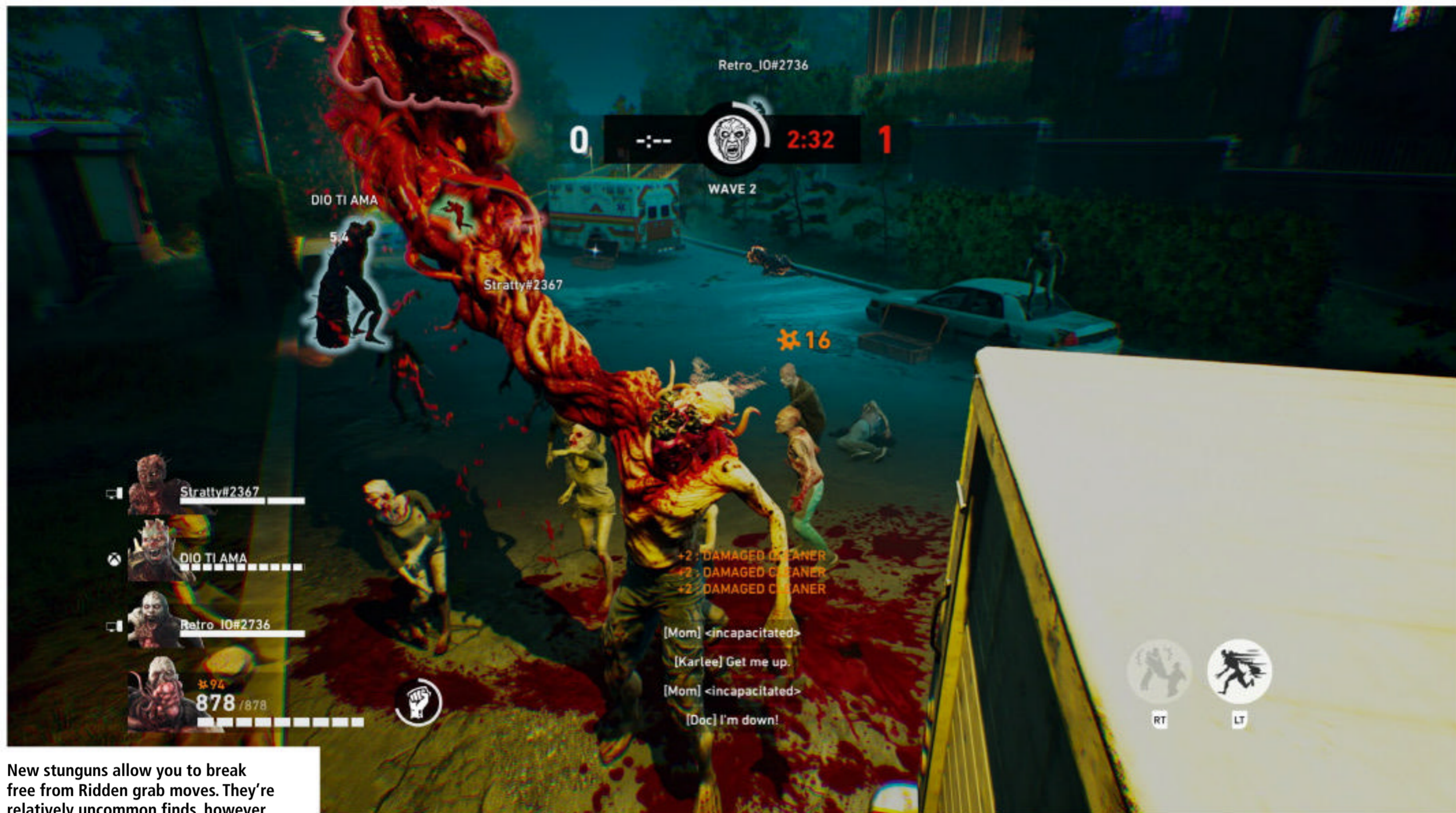
New stunguns allow you to break free from Ridden grab moves. They're relatively uncommon finds, however

Post Script

The fight to become Left 4 Dead's successor

Pinpointing influences is a perilous business, but *Left 4 Dead* is more genre than game nowadays, if not quite up there with the Metroidvania or Roguelike. The imitations and homages span indie and AAA, from Saber's cult favourite *Killing Floor 2* through asteroid-burrowing Moria sim *Deep Rock Galactic* to Arkane's forthcoming *Redfall*, in which punks wielding shotguns and magic battle vampire gangs. *Left 4 Dead*'s most successful spiritual heir and/or competitor is arguably *Call Of Duty*'s long-running Zombies mode, which shambled onto shelves a year after it, and blends co-op wave survival with a *Modern Warfare*-style levelling system. But the greatest and most flagrant of its clones is surely Fatshark's *Warhammer: Vermintide* series, which somehow makes *Left 4 Dead* work in the realm of dark fantasy.

Fatshark's game lacks *Left 4 Dead*'s accessibility — there are too many olde worlde place names and weapons to enhance — and its rodent equivalents for the Special Infected aren't quite as well executed. But it outshines *Left 4 Dead* in terms of characters that are at once potent, predefined individuals and strongly shaped by player behaviour, with hundreds of superbly voiced, contextual dialogue lines. Perhaps most impressively, it manages to be wittier than its inspiration

despite its crushing burden of lore. *Left 4 Dead 2* gave us Ellis, a country mechanic prone to monologuing like he's perched at the bar. *Vermintide* has trash-talking elves, Blackadder-style witchfinders, and a whole archive of drunken voice performances to mark five rousing years of rat murder.

Why has *Left 4 Dead* attracted so many disciples? Partly because there was nothing quite like it when it launched, but also because it tapped into certain undercurrents. It's the closest we have to a videogame adaptation of Danny Boyle's 2002 film 28 Days Later, which rejuvenated zombie cinema by transforming the zombie into a sprinting menace, bursting from the shadows of silent cities. Its semi-serious exploration of group behaviour in life-or-death scenarios helped it reach audiences outside gaming. Its celebration of the 'watercooler anecdote' value of cowardice and treachery have cast a long shadow: we struggle to imagine the social stealth genre epitomised by *Among Us* existing without *Left 4 Dead*. The game didn't invent everything it's cherished for, however. It was revolutionary but also reassuringly familiar, its cunning AI Director often feeling like a tabletop GM, its squad mechanics stirring up memories of *Gauntlet*.

Left 4 Dead set trends for environmental storytelling, its legendary saferoom graffiti

and incidental dialogue showing how narrative elements could be piped into multiplayer without breaking the flow. Among *Back 4 Blood*'s mistakes is to bring in too much of that wider world, though this has as much to do with the changing shape of zombie fiction at large. Where *Back 4 Blood*'s community of preppers evokes post-apocalyptic soap operas such as The Walking Dead, *Left 4 Dead*'s campaigns are simple survival stories with the pacing of a classic 90-minute feature film. Each campaign is introduced by a vintage movie poster, with players credited as actors.

These diverging reference points partly explain *Back 4 Blood*'s comparative lack of intrigue or suspense. Set sometime after the zombie outbreak, *Back 4 Blood* trades on quests about clearing territory or acquiring resources: its levels are organised around a quasi-military hub, and full of NPCs in need of supplies. It's a resurgent society rather than a smoking ruin, a settled, storied environment appropriate to a game about acquiring things or unlocking them. *Left 4 Dead*'s apocalypse is more recent and hazy at the edges, its maps like islands in the mist, its fires still blazing. The objective is generally just to get the hell out of there, which makes the landscapes all the more intriguing — nothing haunts you, after all, like a place you have to escape from. ■
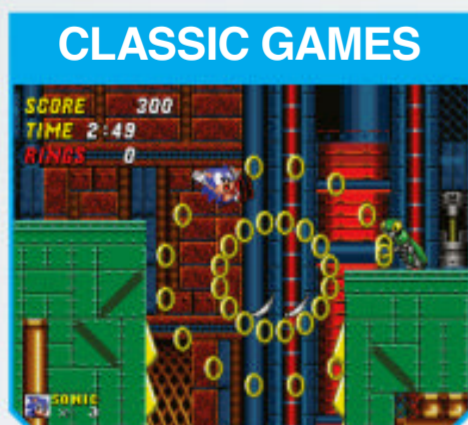
Lemnis Gate

An untouched, fresh *Lemnis Gate* map is a beautiful thing, in its way. There are a few quiet seconds before a match begins when, as a drone, you skim over the contours of your soon-to-be battlefield, refamiliarising yourself with all the carefully blocked sightlines and hidden layers of verticality. It's not that so much that they're especially entrancing vistas — stacks of prefab buildings in caverns and lunar craters and Endor-like forests, they're handsome but ultimately serviceable spaces for a shootout. No, the reason you'll come to cherish these maps in their natural state is that you know what's to come.

The first character flickers into existence, plays out their own private loop for 25 seconds. Then another, and another, and another, until there are ten or a dozen competitors on the field, all engaged in a tug-of-war over that same half-minute window of time and space. Watching all this unfold, turn after turn, you try to keep up with the action, the splitting threads of cause and effect. By the end of a round, it's all far too much to take in at once — so that, when the map is wiped clean, and the players swap ends for a second go, it's an incredible relief. All those muddy overlapping footprints gone, your little untouched patch of snow restored. Time to get it dirty all over again.

It's been some time since a game overclocked our brain in the way the late stages of a *Lemnis Gate* match can. In the moment, it plays with all the rampancy of your average online shooter, but layered with a whole other set of mental demands. Initially, the loop makes things easier: after all, this is a shooter in which you know exactly what is going to happen, and where, and *when*. Think of that kerbside puddle in Groundhog Day, the one Phil Connors eventually learns to hop over. Except here it's an incoming grenade, and Ned Ryerson is a gas-masked maniac with a chemical weapon. On your next loop, you can avoid the spot where you know the grenade will land, and train your sniper scope on that corner, as you wait for old Ned to round it.

But then your opposite number gets the opportunity to counter. Maybe they throw a protective bubble shield over Ned, just in time to block your headshot, or shatter your sniper's skull with a high-velocity round of their own, striking a moment before he can pull the trigger. Then again, maybe they decide poor Ned isn't worth saving and instead chase the objective, creating a whole new mess for you to clean up next turn.

If the possibilities can be overwhelmingly expansive, the component parts — snipers, grenades, objectives — remain simple. There are seven character classes, deployed one per turn. Laying down turrets as Vendetta, the engineer character, is a common opening gambit; teleporting around as Ned — sorry, *Toxin* — and coating likely routes with poison is another solid bet. Rush, on the other hand, comes into his own in the final round:

Here it's an incoming grenade, and Ned Ryerson is a gas-masked maniac with a chemical weapon

OUT OF THE LOOP
It's not often that an FPS requires an explanation of exactly what it means to shoot someone, but *Lemnis Gate*'s gunfights are different to all others. For one thing, at least in the turn-based mode, they're asynchronous. Your target can't respond to your attacks, though smart players might try to anticipate them, dodging or returning fire at what – on their turn – was empty space. And then there's the question of what a kill is worth. In objective-based modes, there are a few points attached, but the real value stems from what that kill prevents: dispatching a threat in the first five seconds then dying yourself can be worth more than taking out three enemies in the loop's closing moments, when their destinies have already played out.

his twin SMGs are relatively weak but, if you use his speed-boost ability smartly, just a tickle can wipe out an entire enemy squad whose health bars have been eroded by his teammates. For a less subtle approach to mopping up, there's Deathblow, whose rocket launcher and proximity mines make him powerful but risky — it's not unusual for one of your former avatars to step in the path of a rocket at the wrong moment. (Had you been counting the seconds, you could have anticipated this.)

This all makes for unusually thoughtful deathmatches, but it's in the objective-based modes where *Lemnis Gate* really shines. Seek & Destroy is an asymmetric game where the defending team attempts to protect two generators from the attackers. Domination and Retrieve XM have both sides sharing objectives — in the former, four pylons claimed by whoever deals them the most damage; in the latter, four portable polyhedrons that must be run back to base in order to score, like a multiball version of capture the flag.

These are enough to reinvent each character's purpose. In Retrieve XM, Rush becomes a viable first-turn opener, able to grab two objectives in a single loop. Which, naturally, makes him an immediate target — you might spend the rest of the game defending him. Defending in Seek & Destroy, KARL's protective bubbles can shield the generators from harm; in Domination, they might be better deployed to cover your own position while training your laser on the nearest pylon.

This is without mentioning the 2v2 mode, or the option for simultaneous play. Ratloop Games is clearly determined to squeeze every last drop of variety from what's here — which is handy because, in line with the game's price, those contents are a little slender. There are three maps for each mode, 12 in total, and the resulting familiarity can be habit-forming, in terms of the characters and routes you pick. Useful for closing off the dizzying possibility space a little, perhaps, but potentially denying so much of the game's excitement.

If *Lemnis Gate* were turn-based in its controls as well as its strategies, this might be a bigger problem. But plans require execution, and with just 25 seconds to pull it off, there's pressure on every manoeuvre. Land a perfect hit, and you'll cut short your target's loop — 20 seconds of cause and effect erased from the timeline. Miss, and events unspool as your opponent intended.

This isn't only a game where a single shot can decide a match, turning a 3-1 defeat into a 4-0 victory, but one where you know those stakes *in advance*. The effect is like trying to play chess after a double espresso, and if we fumble as often as we triumph, that's just more reason to keep coming back. Still, you can probably see why an empty map might appeal. That moment of peace and quiet, as we come down from one match and plan for the next. And the next. And the next.

8

ABOVE Maps can be visited in the game's training mode. Given their dense twists and turns, taking the time to get to know all the potentially useful (or deadly) nooks and crannies is something that pays off in play

TOP Each operative can unlock variants on their base weapon, buffing and debuffing two stats apiece. In practice, the difference is practically imperceptible, but we prefer this approach over upgrades that might give more experienced players the upper hand.
MAIN In later loops, the areas around objectives often become absolute deathtraps. Which poses a question: do you try to swoop in before the bullets start flying, wait until they're all dead, or perhaps chase a less-contested objective?
RIGHT Striker's time-slowing Ripple ability puts no-scope headshots within the reach of even the most reflexively challenged snipers
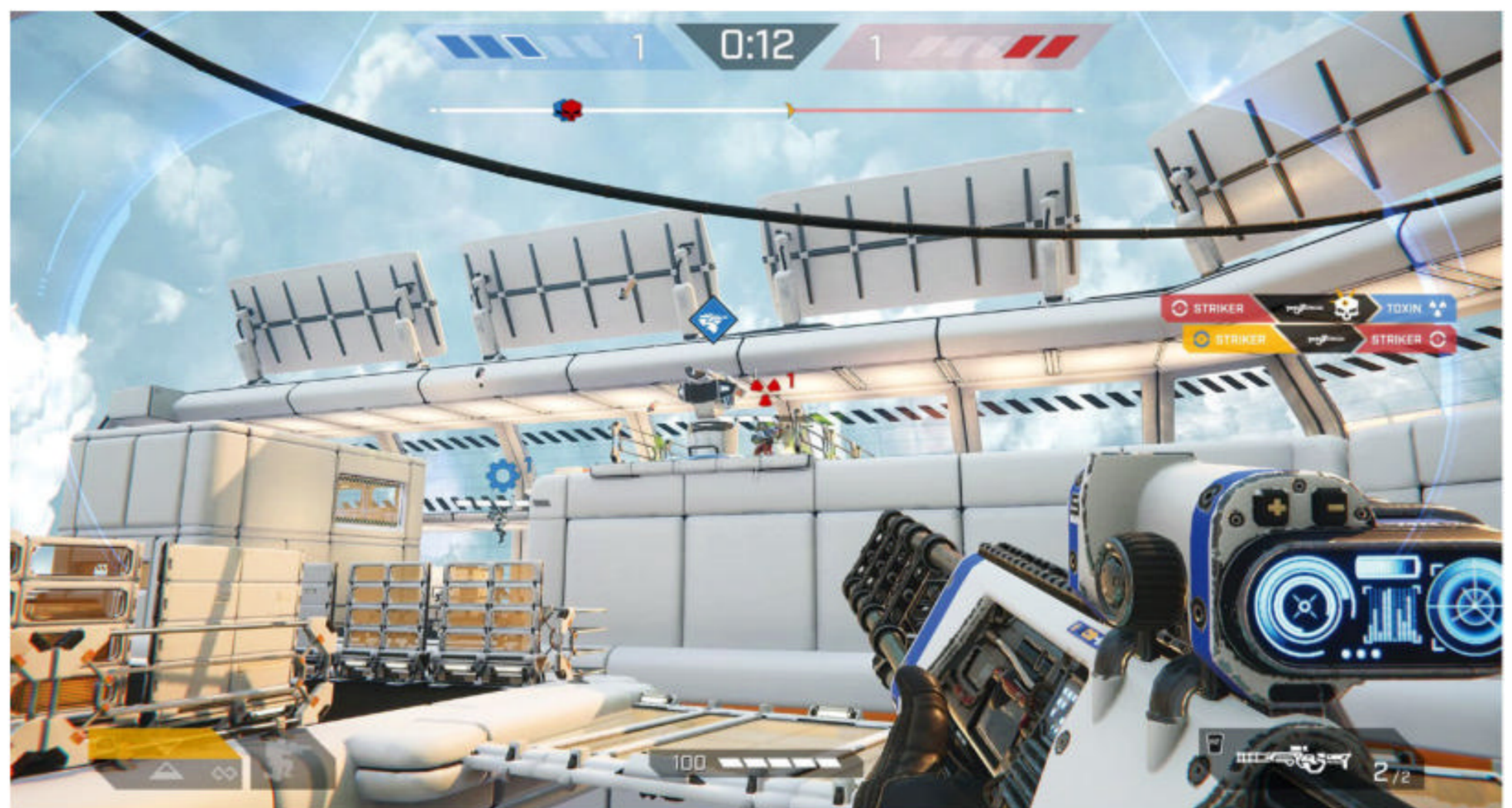
Lost Judgment

Talk about a school of hard knocks. Investigating a case involving a grisly murder and a subway groper, Takayuki Yagami follows the trail to a prestigious academy, where he discovers delinquent students are targeting a vulnerable classmate. Yagami's solution to stopping the bullying is hypocritical, to say the least, as he throws one troublemaker over his shoulder, slamming their nose against the floor, before sliding across to another to knee them in the face. Still, you have to say these snot-nosed brats deserve their punishment: with their sneering jibes and casual callousness, they're even more obnoxious than the lippy gangsters we've grown accustomed to brutalising in RGG Studio's games.

Not that there are many of the old breed left any more. With the Tojo Clan having disbanded — although another group, known as RK, has formed in its wake — this spinoff series steps outside the Tokyo underworld. And, for that matter, Kamurocho: Kazuma Kiryu's old stomping ground is still here, but Yagami spends most of his time in the Isezaki Ijincho district of Yokohama, which is largely as it was in last year's *Like A Dragon*. Now the main series has moved on from realtime fist fights to turn-based brawls, *Lost Judgment* feels like *Yakuza* without the yakuza: if the original *Judgment* represented a conscious choice to tell a different kind of story, this followup reminds us that old habits die hard. You can barely go a couple of minutes without bumping into a group of thugs — and, yes, truants — to take down.

There may be fewer expensive suits and gaudy print shirts on these streets, then, but Yagami is often forced to rely on brawn over brain. Those of us who've played every western-released *Yakuza* (yes, even *Dead Souls*) will hardly mind too much, given further refinements to the combat and a new fighting stance. Snake style is all grabs, throws and counters, reminiscent of Tanimura in *Yakuza 4*, but more varied and responsive — and offers the chance to humiliate frightened opponents into submission instead of knocking them out when your EX gauge is charged. Even so, given the number of encounters we often find ourselves skipping them, pulling out Yagami's skateboard to glide by these prowling packs.

That's less an indictment of the fights than a testament to the gripping story. It's one of the finest this developer has delivered to date, involving an elaborate blackmail plot, an ingenious switcheroo and an attempt to humiliate one of Japan's most powerful institutions. If it spends a little too long ensuring you're keeping up, its corkscrewing plot offers enough surprises to compensate for the frequent exposition, while the performance capture regularly borders on the uncanny. No one does faces quite like RGG Studio — even, it turns out, ones belonging to charred corpses riddled with maggots. And we thought Yagami's punishment for bullies was extreme.

Then again, you might even come to the conclusion that it was deserved. There is, by and large, a degree of

Developer/publisher
Sega (RGG Studio)
Format PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series (tested)
Release Out now

The story is one of the finest this developer has delivered to date, involving an elaborate blackmail plot
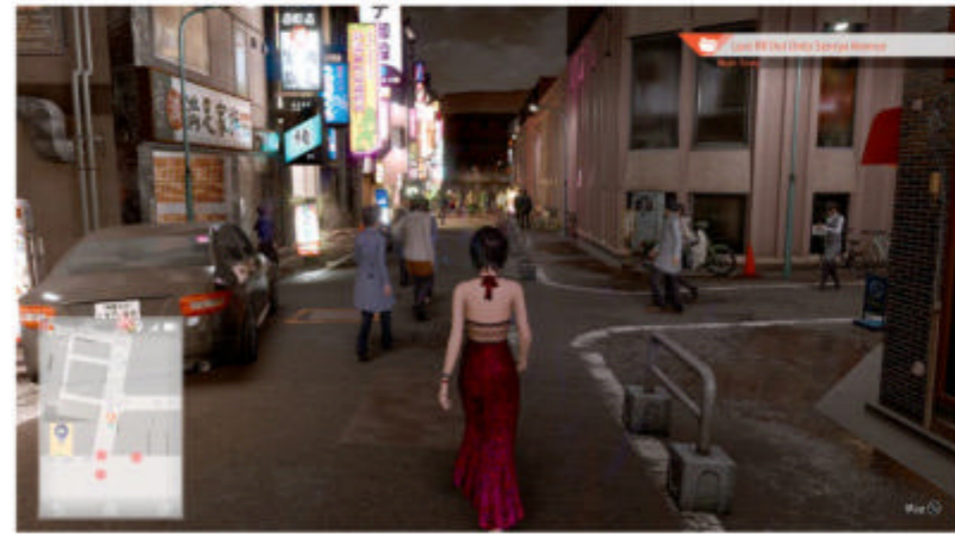

EXTRA CREDIT
Yagami is drawn toward another riddle as he looks into the bullying at Seiryo High School. Amasawa, the inquisitive head of the Mystery Research Club, is investigating the identity of a shady figure, and invites Yagami to become the MRC's official advisor so he might infiltrate a range of after-school clubs. It's a clever narrative wrapper that gathers together a collection of minigames: the robotics club offers a territorial game of Robot Wars where you drop tetromino-shaped pieces to claim turf, while allegations of cheating at an esports club give you an excuse to get good at *Virtua Fighter 5: Final Evolution*. There's a surprisingly fully featured boxing aside involving a freakishly strong student, while the dancing club hosts a robustly entertaining rhythm-action game with a range of unlockable steps and styles.

separation between the game's darkest moments and its silliest, with a structure that locks you out of progressing sidestories at certain junctures: a smart choice given the subject matter, even if it's used inconsistently. The *Yakuza* games have long walked this particular tightrope, of course, though occasionally *Lost Judgment* wobbles, particularly in its exploration of bullying, with scenes to which the opening content warning hardly does justice. One in particular, a clandestine recording of classroom abuse, will be deeply upsetting for some players, hitting far harder than any moments of peril involving snarling thugs ever could. Whether it fully earns the right to tell this kind of story is open to debate, but this is undeniably powerful, affecting stuff.

Working out precisely how to involve the player in this tale, however, occasionally proves beyond RGG Studio. There are welcome refinements to pursuits and tailing missions, the latter appearing so infrequently that they're barely worth quibbling over. The same can't be said for the sporadic instafail stealth sections, which are awful, somehow both prescriptive and pointlessly fussy, and sometimes bizarrely counterintuitive (climbing sequences are clumsy, though they're relatively straightforward). With Yagami's drone underused, investigation largely involves pounding the streets and talking to people. You're not punished for picking the wrong line of questioning or presenting the wrong piece of evidence, though the script works hard to convince you that the pressure's on, and it's undeniably satisfying to nail it first time. If some of the jobs are tedious — one mission asks you to pinpoint every CCTV camera at a train station on the route taken by the aforementioned pervert — then you could argue it effectively captures the drudgery of detective work. And if you need a break, there are many distractions, including an extended subplot that provides the framework for a succession of surprisingly involved side-activities (see 'Extra credit').
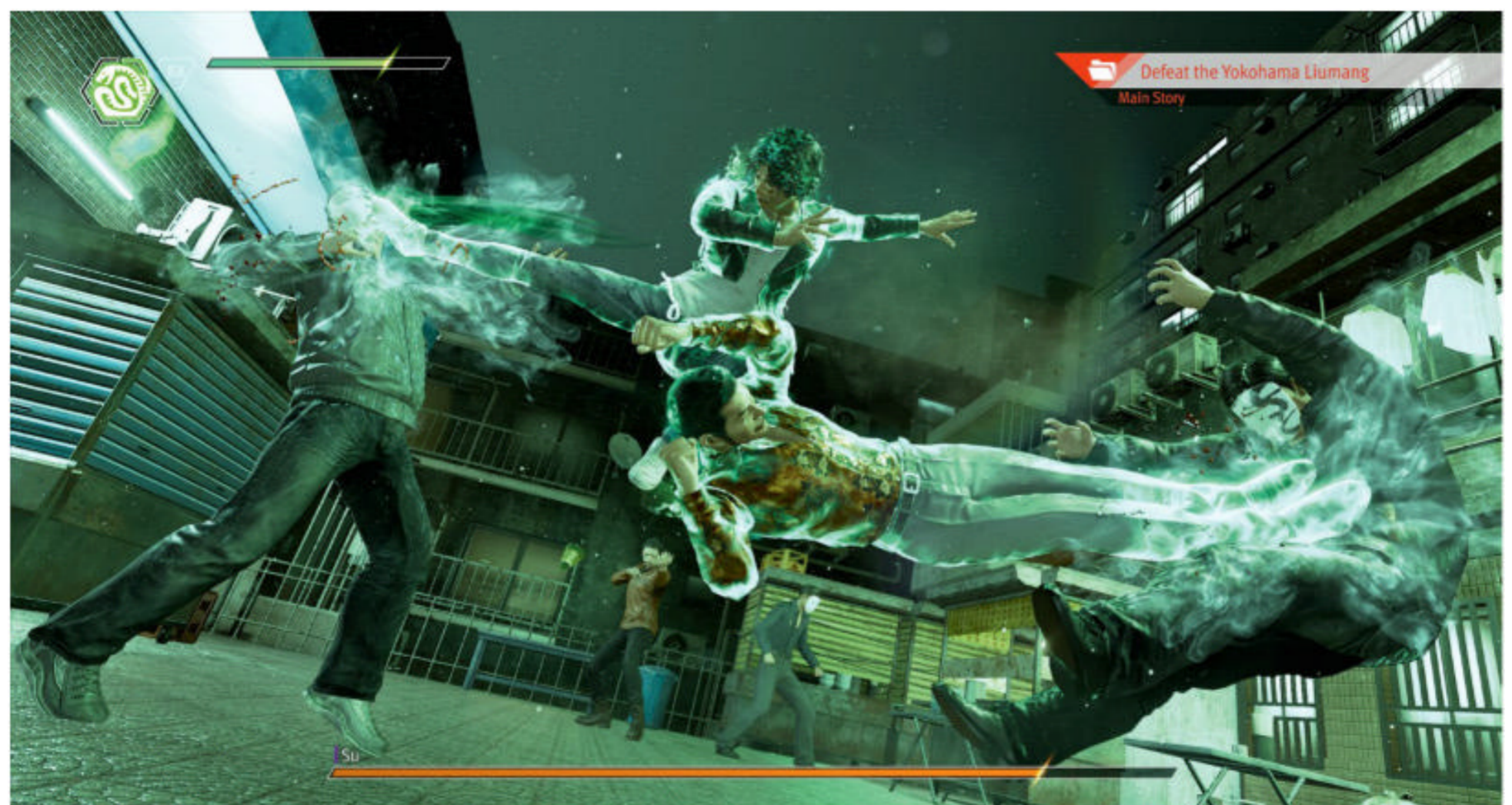
Inevitably, many of the other stories you pick up on the streets of Isezaki Ijincho (and to a lesser extent Kamurocho) descend into violence, which raises a question: is this a detective story, or an action game masquerading as one? And does it matter either way? We'd venture that it does: this still feels like a missed opportunity for RGG Studio to do something different within the worlds it has built — even if that might mean longer gaps between releases as it works out how to make Yagami more gumshoe than grappler. In the meantime, those ongoing arguments between Sega and actor Takuya Kimura's agency over image rights are cause for real concern. Even as he bodyslams kids half his age, Yagami remains the kind of principled, endearingly flawed hero of whom we'd like to see more. If nothing else, *Lost Judgment* proves it would be a great shame if he didn't get another opportunity to find his niche. **7**

Inscryption

Two bright white eyes stare out from the darkness, their owner shrouded in shadow. Inside a claustrophobically gloomy cabin, a mysterious host beckons you to play a tabletop game with card-based battles. This hidden GM dons the occasional mask to inhabit different characters along your journey, lurching forward so you can glimpse these sinister visages, with grasping hands occasionally reaching out from the murk. But whatever else lies beyond that dimly lit playfield and the clutter around it remains a mystery. It is as unsettling as it is thrilling, creating an intoxicating feeling of dark secrets being jealously guarded. And it's the gravitational pull of the unknown — in some cases, the unknowable — that drags you back to the table whenever fortune fails you.

Since that drip feed of discoveries is *Inscryption*'s most precious asset, we'll endeavour to tread carefully. Suffice it to say that this is not simply a virtual D&D campaign, nor a horror-tinged Roguelike with deck-building elements, nor an escape-room puzzler; it is those things combined and more. The game, as is made clear from the start screen, extends beyond the table: when the map is unrolled, before you choose the next stop for your hand-carved playing piece, you can stand up and walk around. The cabin's lighting remains low, again hinting at strange things lurking out of sight. But against the walls you can find a rule book, various furniture and a host of decorative objects, just about all of which can be interacted with in some way. One of your first jobs is to figure out how.

You will need to, because they play key roles in both the card game and the wider story. But first you must reckon with the fact that a few of your cards can talk. They allude to you being their chance to escape — and they yours, as they tease secrets that won't be resolved for some time, if at all. And yes, they even comment on your moves: one is a fawning sycophant, while another regularly scoffs at your actions. "Total misplay," he says, before we hit the bell to make our play and win an encounter in a single turn. We've heard of unreliable narrators, but this is ridiculous. Then again, we're playing a Daniel Mullins (*Pony Island*, *The Hex*) game, so perhaps that shouldn't come as a surprise.

The card game, meanwhile, takes place on a 4x3 board, where your objective is to tip a set of scales as far as they'll go by dealing damage to your opponent while preventing them doing the same to you. Each creature card you play demands a sacrifice: at the start of each turn you choose between drawing a squirrel or picking from your deck, the former a quick and easy kill to put another animal on the board. Other cards cost bones, which pile up along with the dead: sometimes it pays to keep a card in play to protect yourself, but if removing it means deploying a powerful critter sooner, then out comes the knife. Each card has an attack and HP value,

It is as unsettling as it is thrilling, creating an intoxicating feeling of dark secrets being jealously guarded

BURN CARD
Most stops on your journey offer some way to expand or modify your deck. A trapper offers pelts that can be played at no cost to block an incoming attack, though they're a waste of a draw when you most need to tilt the scales. A woodcarver's totems imbue cards of a specific taxonomy with a sigil: three blood drops for squirrels and you're laughing. Then there are the hungry survivors gathered around a warming campfire. Staying a while offers a single card a health or power boost, but it's a risk to linger, as you notice some licking their lips; stay longer and they might devour the animal entirely. That isn't always the worst option: there aren't many other ways to get rid of the chaff from your increasingly bulging deck.

alongside one or more sigils: these might let animals soar over the enemy's defensive line, submerge themselves in water between turns, swipe in multiple directions when attacking, or leap in to take a blow ahead of a vulnerable unit.

Your opponent's cards can commandeer two rows — the first sign that these fights aren't entirely fair. Boss characters snuff out one of your two candles (lives) if you reach them with both lit, adding extra pressure to these fraught encounters. A mad-eyed Prospector turns your back row into gold nuggets after you've tipped the scales once, while the Angler steals your best card — though you can return the favour when you later gain access to his hook. Indeed, you can gain the upper hand via single-use items collected or traded along the way: scissors can cut up a single card, while a goat offers three blood droplets to the squirrel's one, giving you the chance to bring out higher-value cards, such as a grizzly bear. And you can make a sacrifice of your own: when you see a pair of pliers on your side of the table, you shudder in the knowledge of what it will mean to use them. There's a dagger, too, which gains you a more significant advantage, but comes at considerable (and grimace-inducing) cost.

Or does it? You're instantly offered a way out of that grisly trade-off — indeed, one particular mystery can only be resolved this way — which rather lessens the impact of using the dagger. That lack of permanence stings in a very different way elsewhere: narrative progression is retained, but you lose the non-speaking majority of your deck, including those you upgraded (in some cases several times) on the road. A 'death card' can be printed between turns, based on three picks from your deck — potentially giving you a low-cost, high-output option, if you're lucky. But will that card even show up on your next adventure?

Randomness is part of the deal, of course, but even as the game's knotty rules are internalised, there are others that seem beyond the player's ken — and at times you sense it all getting away from Mullins, too. Simply, luck plays too big a role; a couple of bad draws can leave you with an unwinnable hand, and wipe away up to half an hour's progress with almost nothing to show for it. That it deigns to throw you the occasional bone after successive failures feels patronising; worse is the condescending way it spells out puzzle solutions you'd worked out but hadn't been able to execute because the RNG gods refused to smile upon you. What makes this all the more maddening is that there are moments of extraordinary ingenuity here; they're just spread a little too thinly. Were *Inscryption* half as long, it would probably be twice the game. As it is, too many of those secrets, when finally teased out of the shadows, are greeted more with relief than delight. **7**

BE SILENT OR I WILL TEAR YOU TO SHREDS.

THIS FOUL CABIN!

SQUIRREL

ABOVE The prominence of the story prevents you from fully enjoying the card game for its own sake. Late setbacks really sting, though you can eventually get your hands on permanent boons to make things easier

MAIN *Inscryption* might have a wide range of cards, but it doesn't have the systemic depth of a true deckbuilder. Though some will find the late-game surprises satisfying, it's hard not to think *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* pulled off similar tricks more efficiently.
ABOVE It pays to keep an eye on what's up ahead. The route you take can have a huge impact on your run, not always for the better.
RIGHT Should you have two or more of the same creature, it's well worth making a beeline for the Mycologists, who can turn a couple of weak cards into a much stronger one – and with no additional cost associated with playing it

Y- YOU NOW HAVE BUT ONE BULLFROG... IT IS STRONGER?

BULLFROG

The Good Life

Journalist Naomi Hayward has two catchphrases you'll hear throughout *The Good Life*. "Goddamn hellhole," she snarls, unable to hide her disdain for the isolated village in the north of England where this New Yorker has been posted for her latest assignment. "Yeah, baby!" is the other, as she speeds giddily through its idyllic pastures while riding a sheep. The contrast is apt for a game that initially appears to be director Hidetaka 'Swery' Suehiro's spin on the wholesome-life-sim genre, before swinging back to his preoccupation with murder and conspiracy.

The village name is a clue that dark matters are afoot: Rainy Woods is a reference to *Deadly Premonition*'s original title. That game was fascinating for providing an outsider's perspective on smalltown America and pop culture. *The Good Life* does much the same with rural England, from the surface details of street signs and red phone boxes to capturing the British love affair with the pub, which includes a drink on the menu called The Brexit (we presume, as with the real thing, it's a punchline that lands better for outsiders). In contrast to these mundanities is Swery's magpieing of British cultural touchstones, from Arthurian legends to Stonehenge, while we count this as the third Japanese release of 2021 to plunder from the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Fortunately, this isn't merely a British version of *Deadly Premonition*, even if it includes a few of its tedious self-maintenance mechanics, such as ensuring your hunger, energy and hygiene levels are tip-top, as well as an in-game clock and calendar to which villagers' routines and shop opening times are bound. Besides a murder early on that quickly undermines Rainy Woods' self-proclaimed status as the "happiest town in the world", the village also hides another secret. At night, its inhabitants transform into either cats and dogs, a discovery that soon affects Hayward as she finds herself able to assume feline and canine forms at the push of a button.

As a cat you can jump over most obstacles, while in firstperson view you can see markings indicating walls that can be scaled to reach otherwise inaccessible areas. You're also a surprisingly agile killer, able to target and pounce upon a variety of prey, from rats to hedgehogs to ducks — all providing a nutritious meal once you've applied a bit of herbal seasoning. As man's best friend, you're able to find items by digging through dirt or rummaging in bins, while your sense of smell also comes in handy for tracking down individuals, providing you have an item with their scent. The latter makes for more engaging searches than simply following a scent trail: here, your firstperson viewpoint displays several patches of smells, with some left as question marks if you have no prior reference. As such, it requires some effort to pick out the target's scent so you don't get lost.

Switching forms takes time, especially since you always have to revert to human form before you can

This isn't merely a British version of Deadly Premonition, even if it includes a few of its tedious mechanics

ANTI-INSTAMEME
Naomi's investigations sometimes require her to obtain evidence with her camera: you pull up the viewfinder by squeezing the left trigger, while ensuring the name of the person or object shows up in the frame before taking the shot. There's also the opportunity for a side-hustle through photo-sharing site Flamingo. The site routinely updates with shot types that are in demand from its users, from pubs to cute couples, letting you know what to look out for around town – although *any* interesting picture can potentially be monetised. There is, however, a limit to the number of images you can upload to your profile, while these can only be uploaded from the desktop in Naomi's house – and in a typical Swery flourish, her Internet speed is a crawl.

change into the other animal. Quite apart from that, it's frankly nonsensical. Yet it's undoubtedly *The Good Life*'s strong point, and makes a refreshing change from Swery's previous attempts to shoehorn atrocious thirdperson shooter mechanics into a series that really didn't need them. Combat is largely secondary — even if it can be hilarious having Hayward attempt to kick a frenzied badger to death — especially when the game finds more novel interactions for her animal or human guises, whether that's making use of a dog's urinating technique or drinking the village vicar under the table.

However, what fun there is to be had in *The Good Life* involves some tedious journeys. The village itself may be compact, but it's situated within a large open world made up of almost nothing but fields, reflecting how Rainy Woods truly is out in the sticks. Reaching a destination on the other side of the map becomes a dull slog, even with fast-travel shrine statues, which charge a small fee to unlock and then again each time you choose to use them thereafter. *Deadly Premonition* had similar longueurs but they were enlivened by its protagonist's amusing or surreal monologues. Hayward isn't nearly such good company, her limited voice lines eventually upstaged by the Geordie narrator, who regularly breaks the fourth wall during cutscenes with advice or admonishment.

Those anticipating something akin to *Animal Crossing* will also be disappointed that the debt looming heavily over you like Tom Nook's mortgages is irrelevant to the busywork other NPCs have for you, which too often amounts to obtuse fetch quests with meagre rewards. It's easier to stick to the main objectives, which consist of three leads you're given early on and are free to investigate in any order, although these will often turn into urgent quests to prevent you from pursuing diversions until you've completed the task at hand. While each thread spirals into unexpected tangents and payoffs, from cosplaying at a medieval soiree to a deranged twist on Jack And The Beanstalk, getting to them is often a chore, sometimes requiring you to talk to multiple people or run an errand first. In a couple of cases, we're required to wait until certain days before an NPC shows up. Thankfully, the in-game clock can be fast-forwarded with a few long lie-downs, provided you don't mind waking up to a grumbling stomach.

In other words, much like Hayward, you will find your feelings towards Rainy Woods oscillating between exasperation and amusement. *The Good Life* makes for a charmingly eccentric getaway for the 12 hours its story lasts, though you'd hardly want to spend weeks, let alone months, there. If nothing else (and we should probably extend our thanks to the game's British cultural ambassador, Q-Games' Dylan Cuthbert), it briefly gives us a reason to feel fond of this sceptred isle. Nowadays, that's no mean feat.

5

ABOVE You'll want to avoid exploring on an empty stomach, although the village has a café and pub to keep you fed, and a grocer's if you fancy buying ingredients in order to make your own meals.
LEFT The way to prove you can knock back pints is appropriately a minigame that requires you to keep a barrel balanced on a seesaw

BELOW Hayward's mortified reaction to discovering that she can relieve herself on command as a dog is rather priceless

ABOVE The villagers' transformations into cats and dogs only occur during a few nights of a full moon. Once the sun rises each day, Rainy Woods becomes just another idyllic village and nobody's any the wiser

Mon Amour

For Yoshiro Kimura, this was always going to be "a small diversion" before the Next Big Thing: the game he thinks might well be his final RPG. And even compared to Kimura's recent output, *Mon Amour is* a slip of a thing: every stage, of which there are 50 in all, is just 15 seconds long, and controlled by a single button – or, if you're playing on Switch, by tapping the touchscreen. Indeed, while we'd recommend the former, the alternative control scheme hints at where the idea may have originated. Yes, this bit of throwaway silliness ends up as perhaps the smartest riff on *Flappy Bird* we've played.

As in Dong Nguyen's infuriatingly compulsive phenomenon, its protagonist plunges toward the bottom of the screen by default; your taps (of button or screen) provide the momentum to keep him airborne, albeit by spinning rather than flapping. And this time you're playing a big-nosed man, the kind of stocky caricature you see on the ground in *Black Bird*, or a distant relative of *Dandy Dungeon*'s Yamada, perhaps. His goal is to rescue his girlfriend from a trio of witches; to achieve this, counterintuitively, he must liberate a succession of other girls by kissing them. Reach the right side of the screen and plant a smacker on their lips and they'll

The score summary after every tenth stage might call them all 'girls', but it soon becomes clear *Mon Amour*'s passionate hero isn't particularly picky about who – or, indeed, what – he smooches during his quest

Developer/publisher Onion Games
Format PC, Switch (tested)
**Release** Out now

KISS CHASE
To get the best ending you need to have rescued all 65 individual citizens: there's a list of the ones you're missing on the menu, while an in-game notification lets you know when you've deposited a newcomer in the castle. Talking of notifications, stick around on the start screen and you get newsflashes of how other players perished. "Burned to death at the demon world!" is nothing to be ashamed of. "Died easily on Level 12!" is rather more embarrassing.

show their gratitude by releasing a spray of hearts and the occasional piece of fruit. They'll also join you for the next stage, trailing behind, essentially acting as extra lives — each one allows you to take an extra hit from the buildings that encroach in small steps from top and bottom.

With no tutorial, you learn this through playing, as over repeat runs this outwardly simplistic game steadily reveals its hidden depths. Swerving the hearts increases the chance of new ones merging to form giant, score-boosting variants that help push back those playspace-cramping skylines. Collecting those fruits has a similar effect, but you might want to save the melons for the ninth stage of each set, where you must swoop and soar to dodge a variety of hazards — from a giant, shadowy coelacanth to projectile-lobbing cherubim and a football match in progress. Keeping the trail intact is crucial if you're looking to climb the leaderboards: each tenth stage sees you dropping them off safely at a castle, with a *huge* bonus awarded for bringing all nine.

All of this is delivered in classic Kimura style, with vibrant colours, surreal flourishes, babbling speech samples and a loop of scat singing (one variant comes with a percussive intro reminiscent of a certain jungle-based reality show) that you will struggle to evict from your brain. A small diversion, in other words, that lives up to both parts of the equation.

7
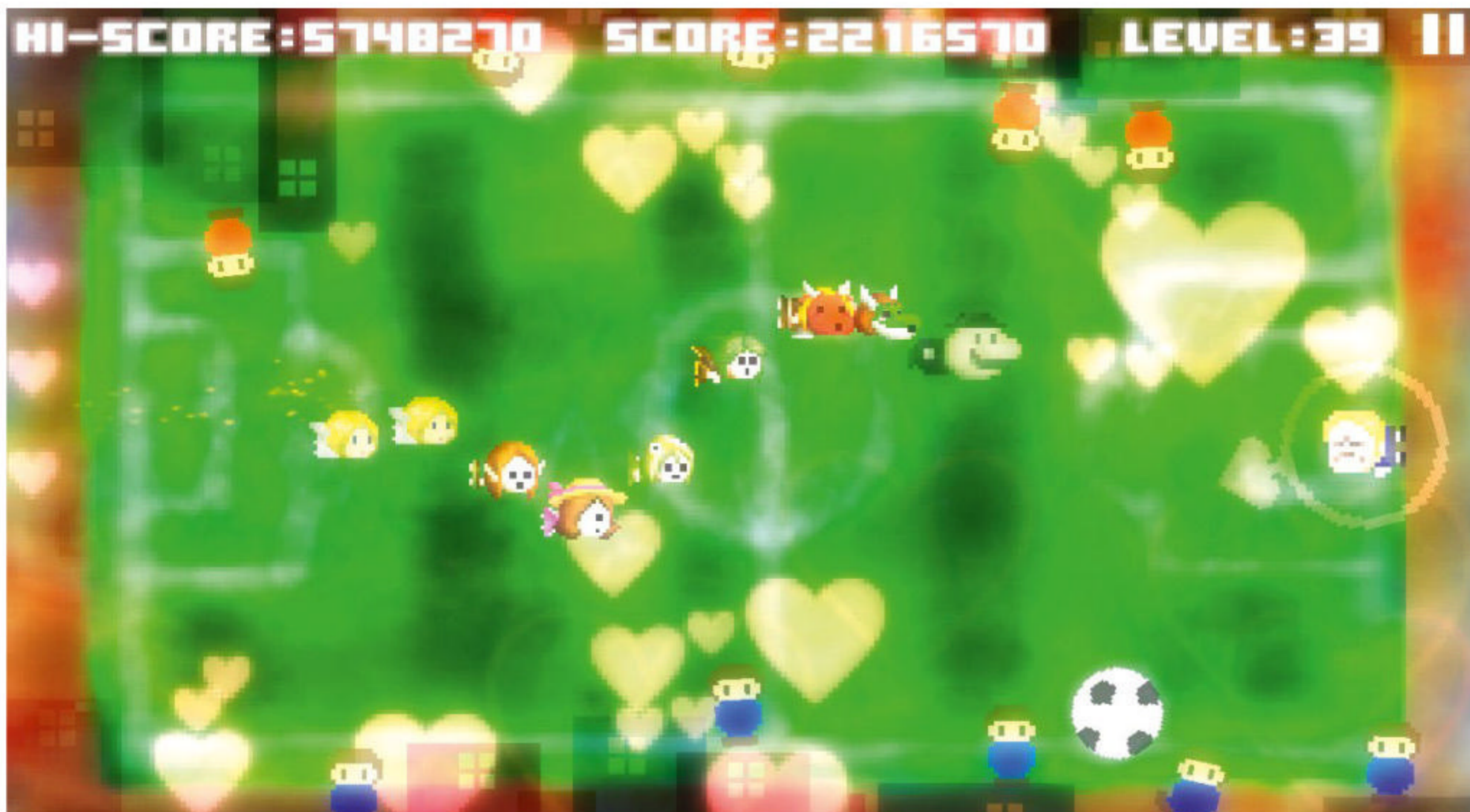
ElecHead

W e've heard of throwing yourself into your work, but this is ridiculous. Tasked with bringing light back to the world, Elec is certainly the 'bot for the job: he can conduct electricity, charging everything he touches. Which inevitably means he's also a hazard to himself. To get by, then, he needs to use his noggin, and his game takes that idea to its literal conclusion: he can detach his head and throw it to activate objects, his decapitated body capable of surviving for ten seconds before exploding.

It's a concept that powers a puzzle-platformer of rare purity and purpose. Just about every screen contains a challenge of sorts. Before you gain the ability to remove your dome, it's about pressing against walls and leaping over anything that might complete a circuit and produce a deadly bolt to zap you into tiny metallic pieces. Then you trigger moving platforms and lifts, activating bridges that disappear when your feet are in the air, darting through narrow mazes to grab key cards to unlock doors before hotfooting it back to your head as the timer counts down to zero.

On it goes, somehow finding fresh twists on this simple formula at every turn. Some screens seem almost impossible at first, until you realise there are

Fireballs seem an odd fit for this world, but as a moving hazard they represent a different kind of challenge to negotiate. One such puzzle is curiously reminiscent of a moment from Playdead's *Inside*
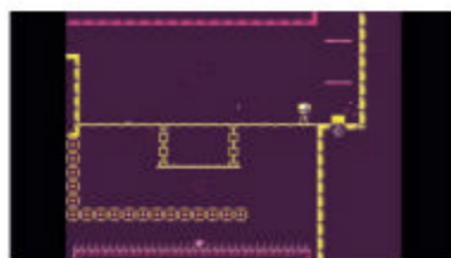
CHUCK YOUR HEAD
There are 20 of a certain collectable to find in the world, though some of them are incredibly well hidden, with most secreted at the end of alternative routes or tucked behind and beneath hidden walls and secret floors. Others demand certain techniques you only learn later on, as you warp back to earlier areas to discover the world is bigger than it first seems. You can unlock additional colour schemes, too, though the two-tone approach persists for the sake of clarity.

walls and ceilings that extend into the next or previous rooms. Gaps may appear far too large, until you realise you can leap up, catch your head and throw it once more before it touches down and you're toast. And that's before the various checkpoint markers and fast-travel portals are folded in; sometimes what feels like a cheat is, in fact, the intended solution. It deftly balances its two disciplines. For some conundrums you need sharp twitch skills, with others requiring you to pause for thought before trying to execute your plan. By and large, if an approach feels unnecessarily finicky, then you're probably on the wrong track — though a few late-game challenges are on the verge of being a little too exacting.

In both its minimalist presentation and constant string of epiphanies, we're reminded of HAL Laboratory's *BoxBoy!* series. You may find yourself, as we did, cooing like a lovelorn pigeon at the unpretentious ingenuity of some of these puzzles. Like *BoxBoy!*, its austere looks belie the gentle playfulness of its designs, and it throws in a few amusing visual flourishes besides: sometimes Elec will put his head back on upside-down, while standing on a plinth to switch on a dormant screen sometimes displays nothing more than a spiral of pixelated poop. Short but memorable, this is a low-key triumph: if Japanese indie developer NamaTakahashi doesn't go on to even greater things, well, we'll be shocked.

8

Unpacking

Moving house is said to be the third most stressful life event after the death of a loved one and divorce. Little wonder, since it must also be one of the most existentially terrifying: when you realise your life so far essentially amounts to everything held within these cardboard boxes, these physical remnants of the past, many with hopes, dreams and memories permanently attached. But then comes the part where you get to take it all back out again — this fresh start affording a new home for all those essentials, keepsakes and knickknacks, too.

Unpacking recreates that moment, minus the frustrated swearing and aching limbs. Boxes are unsealed with a click, objects can be lifted and placed without exertion, and empty containers are folded up and pop out of existence in a trice (accompanied by a wonderful sound effect that sets our pleasure sensors tingling each time we withdraw the final item). The process says plenty about the player: it's satisfying to organise objects in a tidy fashion, yes, but there's a degree of self-expression in their arrangement. There are limitations — objects in the 'wrong' place are highlighted in red once all items have been unboxed, so you can't just leave everything strewn on a bed, say.

Items unpacked in the wrong room come towards the bottom of boxes, but isn't it more likely that they'd be squeezed in at the top? Given so many authentic touches throughout, though, this is the tiniest of nitpicks

MOVING ON
The only words in the story accompany the picture that slots into the protagonist's photo album once you've completed the job. Its caption adjusts to the room in which you finished up, offering just a smattering of context (a return to the family home prompts a sad, recognisable truth: "This room used to feel bigger"). You can watch an accelerated clip of your work, and even save it – albeit with your actions locked to a single room – as a GIF.

Some restrictions seem arbitrary, but there's sufficient leeway to ensure your rooms will likely look very different from someone else's.

While the final layouts might say something about you, these pixel-art objects and environments — richly rendered, albeit with some creative licence taken in the way some of them are scaled to accommodate characterful little details — tell a surprisingly touching story about their owner. There are eight stages in all, beginning with a tween girl finally getting a room of her own, before we join her though her uni years and on to adulthood. As she moves in with a new partner, she must cram her possessions into a smaller space; we feel something of her disappointment as we realise there's no wall space for a framed certificate that clearly means something, and are forced to store it under the bed.

The passage of time is communicated through changing decor and technology's march, as a GameCube is joined by a Wii, a desktop PC supplemented by a laptop, and a chunky monitor replaced with a flatscreen. When we find ourselves marvelling at familiar items (the pig plush! The Ghost World DVD!) that have survived the trip, just as we feel a twinge of sadness at what's missing, we wonder: can you feel nostalgic for someone else's past? This clever, relatable and decidedly stress-free game — a simple idea, near perfectly realised — suggests it's entirely possible.

8

Beast Breaker

Rarely do we encounter a game that seems to misunderstand so completely what makes its inspirations tick. The debut from *Threes* designer Asher Vollmer's new studio Vodeo Games is a turn-based tile-smasher that seeks to combine the bouncy arcade action of games such as *Peggle* and *Holedown* (*Arkanoid*, too) with an RPG structure and tactical elements. But aside from its cheerful ambience and likeable characters, it simply doesn't hold together.

As Skipper, a heroic mouse, you must stop a succession of ferocious beasts attacking a village. First, you track them across a small hexagonal grid, foraging for ingredients that can add a variety of status effects to your attacks. Then, in battle, you launch Skipper towards a monster's breakable scales, bouncing around like a furry pinball to strip back its armour and reveal the vulnerable cores beneath. Each regular attack fills a meter giving access to stronger moves: with a bow you can loose off a spread of arrows, while a hammer can be slammed down or spun to land multiple blows. Destroy a core and you limit the beast's attacking potential while delaying its rampage, giving you a few more turns to take it down. And should all else fail, an ally will dive into the fray once per battle to give you an extra chance.

The game's structure exacerbates its problems, with the same monsters recurring time and again: beating them to obtain crafting materials is the only way to get more powerful weapons for Skipper the mouse

BROKEN ARMS
The weapons you unlock after the sword betray Vodeo Games' lack of confidence in its own mechanics. If the studio truly believes the game has "satisfying pinball physics", why would it give us weapons that invite us to stand still and fire (the bow) or bring us to a stop when we hit a surface (the hammer)? Leaping attacks feel like a cheap way to bypass a monster's defences, while there's little satisfaction in finishing a battle in a couple of turns via an attack that halves a core's health with each hit.

It's forgiving, then, but it has to be, because you don't know where you'll end up after launching an attack. What's missing is gravity: in *Peggle* and *Holedown* every shot, sooner or later, results in you falling off the bottom of the screen. Here, you simply come to a stop. That all-important momentum is absent: the physics of movement just feels wrong, and as such you cannot rely on it. It hardly helps that the beasts are abstract assemblies of curves and crystalline shapes arranged at odd angles, such that it's hard to determine how Skipper will bounce off any object. Instead you launch, cross your fingers and hope you don't land within the beast's red zone of attack. And then hope that when they rearrange their position, you're not left in a spot from which the core you were targeting is impossible to reach.

That can, and does, happen with annoying regularity, making straightforward battles attritional, as scales grow back by the time you're perfectly lined up. With zero punishment for failure, it's not frustrating so much as tedious, success coming down as much to favourable bounces and the whims of the beast's movement as skill or strategy. Luck is a factor in *Peggle*, of course, but there is none of PopCap's masterful use of feedback here, nor anything close to its triumphant celebrations when you win. Vollmer will doubtless bounce back, but from such an evidently talented designer this feels like a curious misfire.

5

Genshin Impact

How the free-to-play smash encourages a
new approach to open-world adventuring

BY ALAN WEN

Developer/publisher MiHoYo **Format** Android, iOS, PC, PS4, PS5 **Release** 2020

C limbing a peak and taking in the vista before you — surely the defining moment of any open-world game worth its salt. Your eye scans a distant mountain; a structure that was previously out of view; a landmark just itching to be discovered. In between are plenty of enemy encounters, trinkets and tucked-away secrets to divert your attention. And beyond, it's suggested, uncharted territory yet to be revealed.

In most open-world games, you know those foggy patches will be made visible before too long, whether it's ten hours later or 60. But that's simply not the case in *Genshin Impact*. The world of Teyvat is still being built by developer MiHoYo, and seeing those far-off places? It might be another five years away yet.

Take, for example, Inazuma. Not until nine months after launch were we able to cross the sea to this isolated archipelago nation. The *Genshin* community, though, had been aware of its existence for much longer — and not just owing to the incessant data mining that has resulted in character additions being spoiled ahead of time. The region was referenced as far back as the game's first patch last November, where in one seemingly incidental quest you meet an NPC who recounts fleeing the "dangerous" situation back home to make a fresh start.

After many months becoming overly familiar with the opening areas of Mondstadt and Liyue, though, the civil war still raging in Inazuma isn't nearly enough to discourage us from taking in the sights. We probe the new puzzles and mechanics linked to the nation's Electro element. We take note of new enemy types and resources whose uses have yet to be fully revealed. Most of all, we luxuriate in the strong Japanese influence. Liyue was based on Chinese culture and Mondstadt on Northern Europe, but Inazuma is all temples and cherry blossoms, duels with samurai enemies and encounters with the mischievous tanuki guides that hide near shrines and torii gates.

In other words, it's what you'd expect of an expansion bold enough to label itself 'version 2.0' — a substantial hit of new stuff, enough to reinvigorate the base game,

compelling players to return and get their fill before moving on, until the next big thing pulls them back in. Even before Inazuma, however, it's easy to find yourself drawn into *Genshin* on an almost daily basis. Dipping back into Teyvat becomes a comfort routine, nudging out even the likes of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.

Of course, that wasn't the Nintendo title *Genshin* drew comparisons with at launch. And yes, there are some unmistakable similarities to *Breath Of The Wild*. The freedom to glide through the air and climb almost anything, governed by an upgradable stamina gauge; a shared colour palette and softness to its world; even an ambient piano theme that dynamically amps up in combat. But there are key differences, too.

For one, *Genshin* is far breezier to play from the off, without weapon durability, overpowered enemies or climbs ruined by a rain shower to worry about. Meanwhile, the apparent simplicity of combat belies a satisfying depth in the combinations of weapon types and elemental skills, as you switch effortlessly between your party of four characters. Dispatching low-rent mobs becomes a therapeutic thrill, while more strategic party composition matters when taking on tougher bosses. That all of this can be enjoyed on a phone in much the same way as on PS5 sometimes feels little short of astounding — let alone the fact that it doesn't cost a penny to get started.

For Chinese studios such as MiHoYo, free-to-play has long been the standard business model, but never on the triple-A, console-quality scale of *Genshin Impac*t. Like us, many of our fellow players have managed to resist being drawn into *Genshin Impact*'s numerous microtransaction systems, but we can't pretend that the game has made its money — $1 billion in six months, on mobile alone — without enticing players to open their wallets. Chief among those enticements is the ever-growing cast of characters, added to the game's gacha machine during three-week 'Banner' periods, before it's restocked with new toys.

But whether you're a big-spending whale or the more frugal sort (a minnow, perhaps?), this free-to-play, live-service structure means you won't play *Genshin* like other open-world games. *Breath Of The Wild*, ▶
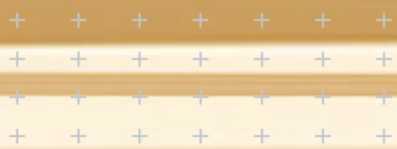
The Witcher 3 or any given *Assassin's Creed*: these are designed to keep players absorbed for a hundred hours or more, certainly, but with a definite end, at which point most players will happily put down their controller and move on to the next big thing.

Genshin, meanwhile, is in no rush to tell its story. After a meaty prologue that has you saving Mondstadt from a frenzied dragon deity — itself roughly the length of your average triple-A singleplayer campaign — the game's core quests continue to arrive in episodic morsels. Not that simply waiting for the full meal to be served is an option. Catching up on newer quests will first require levelling up to a specific Adventure Rank, an overarching value that sits atop your individual character levels, and nudges up the toughness of enemies as it rises.

There's no denying, then, that the daily

But what might seem like an exploitative way of squeezing cash out of players could also be interpreted as a method to discourage tedious farming. (Of course we *would* say that, hundreds of hours deep into the game.)

It's worth noting that Resin doesn't prevent you from roaming Teyvat, getting caught up in fights or other activities, or collecting the Oculi orbs used to upgrade

Gliding from on high is often the best way to get around Teyvat, making it easy to avoid unnecessary fights or zero in on resource spots you've marked on the map

IT ALL FEELS LIKE A GENTLE NUDGE TO PUT DOWN THE CONTROLLER – AND IT'S A SUGGESTION WORTH TAKING

grind is central to *Genshin Impact*. It's not enough just to unlock a five-star character; you'll want to level up their stats and weapons before they're viable. Doing so requires a huge amount of resources: XP-bestowing books increase character level, while ore is needed to enhance weapons. Ascending to the highest levels requires loot dropped by specific enemies, which lends the grind a focus that will be familiar to any *Monster Hunter* player. You're never jumping into a fight without a good reason.

In order to claim your rewards, though, you need to tap another resource: Resin. This has drawn comparisons to those ungainly free-to-play stamina systems which limit the player to a few activities before they run out of energy, leaving you to wait out the long refresh time or — of course — spend a little money to hurry things along.

your stamina. But more to the point, the rest of its world operates on reset timers whose gears can't be greased with the application of cash. You'll need to wait as long as 72 hours in some cases for a fresh yield of daily quests, store items or resources. Even enemies will take a while to respawn if you've been rinsing one type for long enough.

It all feels like a gentle nudge to put down the controller — and it's a suggestion worth taking. Instead of binging whole evenings or weekends, there's pleasure to be found logging in for 30 minutes a day, mining some crystal chunks here, taking on an Elemental Hypostasis there, instead of burning out from open-world fatigue, something that would be easy to do as Teyvat keeps growing.

Patches don't just add story content but also time-limited events and challenges that build on existing mechanics and sometimes

Genshin's characters aren't short of detractors. For some, Paimon (left) is a much more annoying and talkative Navi

CROSSING WORLDS

You can argue that multiverses are part of *Genshin*'s lore. Your protagonist and their twin had been travelling between worlds before they were separated and stranded in Teyvat, which is why you're often referred to as 'Traveller'. Eccentric Electro archer Fischl – or the Prinzessin Der Verurteilung, to use her self-applied moniker – similarly claims to hail from another world. But there's one character we can confirm has made the leap between universes: *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s Aloy (above). Whether MiHoYo is about to open the multiversal floodgates like *Fortnite* is debatable, though, chiefly because the Nora hunter is a freebie rather than an incentive to spend.

An advantage of Inazuma being an archipelago is that MiHoYo has been able to steadily broaden its geography, introducing new islands and mysteries to the region bit by bit

While there are duplicate enemies, specific types still drop different loot that goes towards ascending specific characters or weapons

introduce new ones altogether. To the game's action-RPG foundation, MiHoYo has added minigames such as fishing and tower defence. There's the option to build your own house on a floating island tucked away in an enchanted teapot, and even something resembling a dating sim.

The model here is less traditional open-world design, and closer to an MMO, with two major differences. First, the game's multiplayer is purely optional, giving you the freedom to switch between party members yourself, rather than filling their shoes with online strangers. And second, new additions arrive in a matter of weeks rather than months or years, as is more often the case with updates and expansions to games such as *Final Fantasy XIV*.

There are questions around whether this cadence is one MiHoYo can sustain in the long run, with some players grumbling over the quality of five-star characters being rushed out to meet each new Banner release — an understandable concern if they've been spending money to try to unlock them. And while we don't ever expect to see the game following *Destiny 2*, with ageing mainline content removed wholesale, it's a shame to see time-limited events so casually discarded once they've run their course, especially when it's something as substantial as June's Midsummer Island Adventure, a *Wind Waker*-style sojourn through a new map that was snatched away as suddenly as it was introduced.

But even as the game continues to push into MMO territory, it's worth remembering where we started: at the top of a mountain, taking in the view. A year on, it's still too early to say how *Genshin Impact* might influence the future of open-world games — remember how long it took for others to start borrowing from *Breath Of The Wild*? It's difficult to imagine Ubisoft rolling out one of its maps in such piecemeal fashion, even in the face of rumours that the next *Assassin's Creed* will follow the live-service path. (At least, assuming it sticks to the traditional model of players paying their entry fee upfront.) But as a growing number of open-world games of ever-more-daunting scale demand larger and larger swathes of our time, *Genshin Impact* feels increasingly like a comforting alternative. For all its free-to-play machinations, this is a game that discourages lengthy binges, and reminds us to enjoy everything in moderation. ■

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

Outer Wilds

Developer Mobius Digital **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

Much like its perpetually destroyed and reborn solar system, *Outer Wilds* feels at once ancient and radically new. Its brilliantly intuitive toymaker's rendering of astrophysics remains light years ahead of most blockbuster space sims, casually teaching you the workings of things such as Lagrange points as you decipher curls of alien text. But it also loops back to an age before save files and the session-based gaming experiences to which they've given rise — a return to the days when you'd finish a game in one fell swoop, not by skimming the intricacies but by mastering them across multiple attempts, the game world slowly fitting itself to your mind like a crystal filling a socket.

There's no progress to be made here. You don't level up, nor do you acquire tools (beyond the starting gear) or leave your mark on the universe. There's no persistent inventory, nothing to distinguish you at the beginning from yourself at the end except knowledge — helped along, admittedly, by the flowering evidence mapper on your ship computer, the one steadily evolving object in the cosmos. Beyond that handhold, nothing is saved, everything is lost, and everything becomes possible once again. The timeloop itself proves unyielding: there's no playing with causality, as in *The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, just exploitation of well-choreographed moving parts so as to slip deeper and deeper, until you eventually learn enough to achieve a resolution.

This lack of permanence or control ought to be distressing, but it actually proves calming; it's this, as much as the baroque majesty of the celestial mechanics, that makes *Outer Wilds* worth revisiting. For all the play of competing gravitational and elemental forces (Jovian cyclones, collapsing binary planets, black holes), this universe doesn't weigh you down. Every start is a fresh start. You begin each day secure in the knowledge that you have everything you will ever need. It's not just a compelling antidote to the incessant reward structures of service games: even peers such as *Into The Breach* seem overstuffed by comparison.

Echoes Of The Eye, the sole expansion, takes all this and wraps it in a single new world that it would be a travesty to spoil. The original game's quantum-mechanic puzzles evolve into occult questions of light and shadow. Its long-vanished Nomai explorers give way to a new race you research through projected images and faintly sinister architecture. The add-on's strength is in some ways that of any DLC chapter, giving you what you already love in a self-sealed form. But it's also a departure for Mobius Digital in terms of theme and storytelling that leaves us eager to discover what the future holds beyond this time-locked solar system. ■

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