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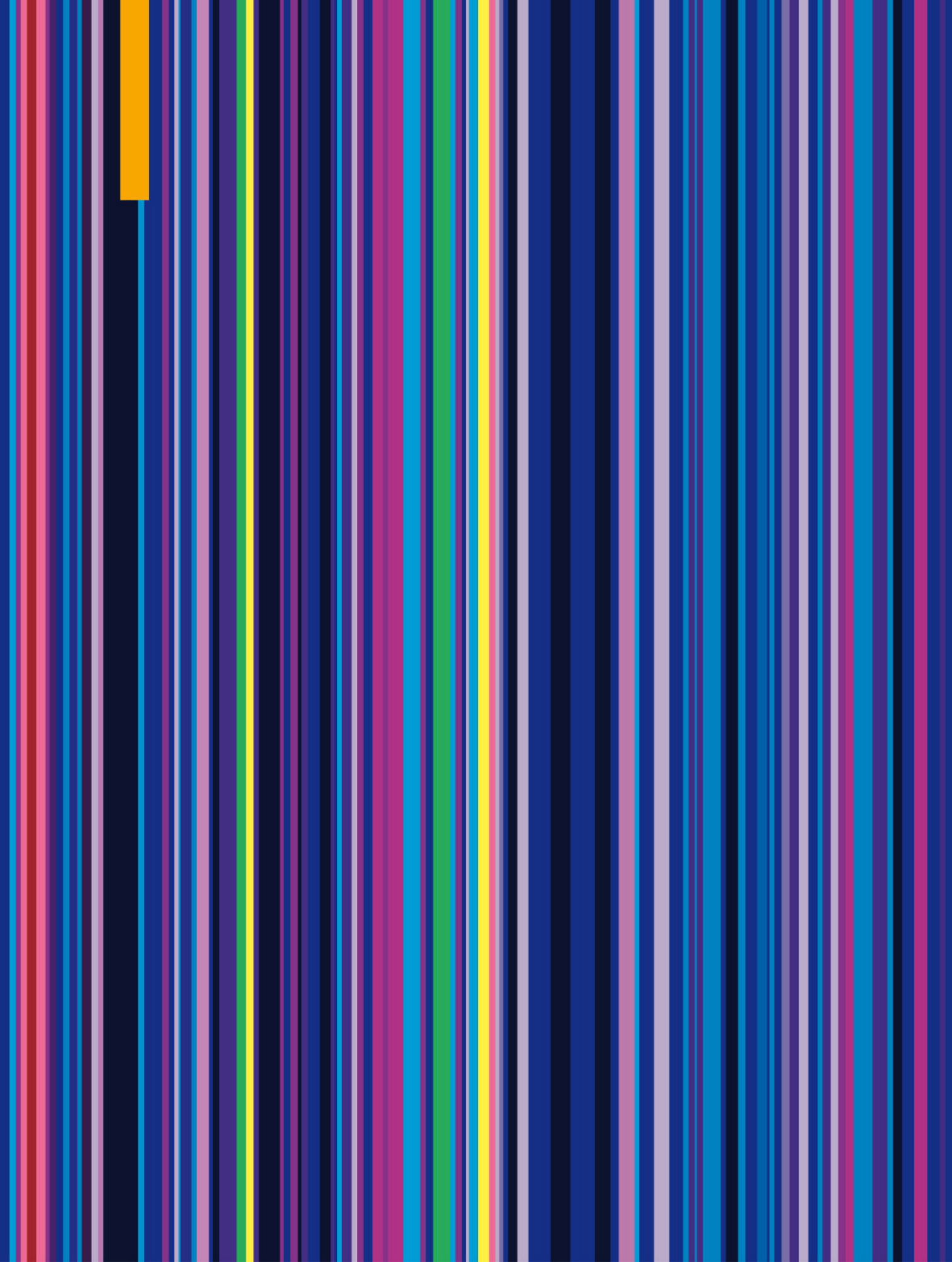
CAPCOM'S ENIGMATIC
SCI-FI ADVENTURE
EMERGES FROM STASIS

PLUS

100 GAMES TO WATCH
SUMMER PREVIEW
SPECIAL INCLUDING
LUMINES ARISE, NIOH 3
AND RESIDENT EVIL 9

#413

SEPTEMBER 2025



Paralysis at the video store? Didn't know we were born

Making a videogame is never easy – every developer has a horror story, sometimes shared in these very pages – but in many ways it is easier today than ever before, thanks to the accessibility and power of modern tools, coupled with digital distribution. Hence why there are so many of the things, and why it is so easy to feel overwhelmed by choice. We receive waves of emails every day announcing new games and inviting us to write about them. For practical reasons, we don't have time to even answer all of them, which is a continuous frustration in itself. And the deluge isn't slowing. In fact, the opposite seems to be happening.

Can there be too many videogames? Certainly there are too many YouTube videos, too many live streams, too many podcasts. There are too many emails, too many phone apps, too many social-media channels. There is too much TV to choose from, and then, when you find something that could be just what you've been looking for, too much likelihood that it's hosted not on the five services for which you pay a subscription, but one of the dozen other options. For whatever reason, though, it feels harder to say, categorically, that we want to see fewer people pouring their passions, skills and energies into making things for us to play.

The unfortunate reality is that a lot of people making games today may not be making them this time next year because they will have failed to get noticed among the thousands of competitors they'll be going up against. (That their target audiences might well be zombified inside the walls of *Fortnite* and *Roblox* is another matter.) Freely available game engines? We have those sorted. Discoverability is the nut that remains to be cracked.

Our rundown of 100 games from this year's summer blowout in LA contains a generous helping of big-name productions that won't need lots of help in getting noticed, but we've tried to foreground some less obvious options, too. For the finale, there's something we didn't even expect to make an appearance. Our *Pragmata* cover story begins on p72.



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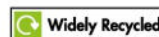


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This is an Xbox

Microsoft commits to pushing its console branding everywhere, extending to **handheld PCs** from Asus

Opening on a clinically lit chamber, its plain grey walls suggesting some kind of scientific facility, music with accentuated drums suggests that we are about to witness something important. A transparent cuboid is suspended in mid-air. Now there are hands holding it and it's beginning to change shape, angular edges melting away as it reconfigures into a more palm-friendly form. A new controller, perhaps? No – an entirely new videogame console, which no one tuning into the Xbox Games Showcase on June 8 was expecting. Yes, everyone knew that Microsoft had a handheld Xbox in development, but was it really ready to show it off? Yes, it turns out that it was. Except it wasn't an entirely new videogame console, after all, but a reconfigured version of Asus's ROG Ally line of handheld PCs. Using the same

basic form factor as the original models, but fattened and reconfigured to feel more like a traditional Xbox controller in the hands, a key difference is the addition of a dedicated Xbox button, intended to operate in much the same way as it does on a typical console.

Following on from Microsoft's Series strategy, the Xbox Ally variant (16GB memory and 512GB storage) will be joined by an Xbox Ally X model (24GB and 1TB) when it launches later this year. The more powerful option, running AMD Ryzen AI Z2 Extreme silicon compared to the base model's modest Z2A, will offer the expected increase in resolution and framerates, but pricing for either variant has yet to be revealed. Given that Asus's existing Ally X retails at £799, it feels unrealistic to expect anything less for an Xbox Ally X, which would make it £300

more expensive than the official going rate for an Xbox Series X, although it would be no surprise to see it launch closer to £1,000. (With the basic ROG Ally model retailing at £449, it's reasonable to expect the low-end Xbox Ally to arrive at around the £500 mark.)

As PCs running Windows 11 – albeit a customised version, trimmed down to reduce processing strain – naturally these handhelds will host considerably more games than traditional Xboxes. During the unveiling, Microsoft emphasised that Xbox Allys will be compatible with all PC store fronts, including Steam, GOG and Epic Games Store. As a result, PC iterations of PS5 games such as the *Spider-Man*, *God Of War* and *Horizon* series will function for the first time on devices carrying Xbox badges. It's unlikely that the lower-end Xbox Ally



will be able to run them convincingly, though, given performance levels offered by handheld PCs at its price point. But then a handheld isn't the ideal place for playing such games. Here at **Edge**, we tend to use Steam Decks more for less processing-hungry games such as *Balatro*, and we expect to see the base Xbox Ally adopted similarly, happily hosting the forthcoming *Hollow Knight: Silksong* while leaving the X model to take the lead for more demanding software.

As well as running PC games natively, both models of hardware will work as remote-play devices and run

The intention, as emphasised by Sarah Bond, is to create “a gaming platform that’s always with you”

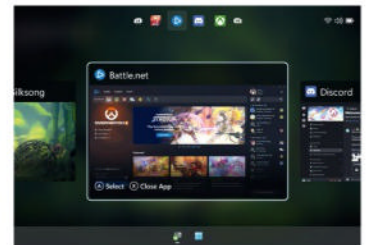
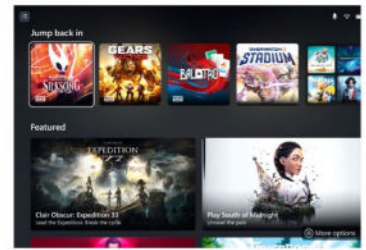
software via Microsoft’s cloud service, syncing data appropriately, making it straightforward to segue from portable to big screen. The intention, as emphasised by Xbox president Sarah Bond, is to create “a gaming platform that’s always with you, so you can play the games you want across devices anywhere you want”. Feeding into the initiative is a new “strategic multi-year partnership” between Microsoft and AMD to “co-engineer silicon across a portfolio of devices, including next-generation Xbox consoles in your living room and in your hands.”

Clearly the deal paves the way for forthcoming Xbox Series successors to be

PCs running Windows, too, and indeed Bond has stated openly that the plan is to make Windows “the number one platform for gaming” – despite this feeling like an unusual proposal for someone with ‘Xbox’ in their job title. One challenge, of course, will be to make PCs that feel like traditional consoles in terms of their affordability. Given the widespread criticism levelled at PS5 Pro’s £699 price tag upon its launch, it’s difficult to imagine an easy ride for a new Xbox aimed at the living room if its RRP nudges towards four figures. Despite wanting to position new devices as consoles for the sake of continuity, Microsoft may yet need to emphasise their qualities as PCs – opening up game-modding opportunities alongside everything else – in order to persuade consumers of the value proposition on offer. ►

To keep costs down, the Xbox Ally X retains the original Ally screen – an LCD unit, with a 120Hz refresh rate and 500 nits of peak brightness. The low-end model uses a 60Wh battery, with 80Wh for the Xbox Ally X variant, but no details have yet been provided for lifespans in continuous use. On the input side, impulse triggers are included on the Ally X, giving it the same kind of haptic-feedback qualities as dedicated Xbox controllers

The base Xbox Ally unit is easily distinguished by its white casing, but its form factor is identical otherwise



The hardware may run a customised version of Windows 11, but Microsoft is doing its best to hide it during operation, with a dedicated interface that takes design cues from the regular Xbox visual approach and emerges at the touch of a button

What's potentially of more interest is how Xbox consoles evolve from here. Asus's world is one of continual hardware refreshes, from its laptop ranges to the original ROG Ally, which was supplanted by a more powerful model 12 months after its debut. As Microsoft's manufacturing partner, it would follow that it'd want to produce revamped Xbox handhelds as frequently as possible. In parallel, could the next 'proper' Xbox, for use beneath the TV, afford to remain as static as an old-fashioned console?

Microsoft's new approach, with Windows leading the way for games across all devices, will not land well with everyone, and opening its push into portables by leaning on Asus's ROG

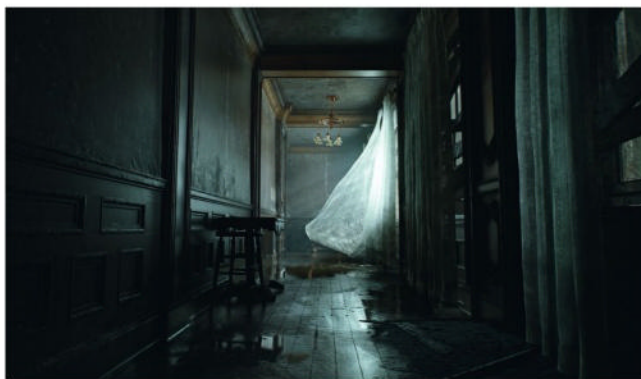
brand wasn't quite the fresh, exciting new dawn longtime Xbox fans were expecting. ("Can you imagine a new portable PlayStation console with a Samsung badge?" groaned an old **Edge** associate.) But the previous Xbox strategy, across two generations of consoles, simply has not worked, and the naive way forward would be to repeat the same approach for a new round of hardware and expect the outcome to be different. At this point, Microsoft has no choice but to try a different tack. With more layoffs said to be imminent within the Xbox division as we go to press, following the thousands of redundancies Microsoft has already made over the past year, a step change was inevitable.

As Microsoft was pledging further commitment to its Xbox Play Anywhere strategy, with cloud-based play at the centre, Sony president Hideaki Nishino was asked about how future PlayStation hardware would make use of game streaming, and indeed if a dedicated PS6 console would be necessary, given how the technology has matured. "Cloud gaming is increasingly providing an additional option for players to access content," Nishino responded, "but our belief is that the majority of players continue to want to play and experience gaming through local execution, without dependency on network conditions. PS5 and PS5 Pro have validated this thesis."

Sony had kicked off this year's activities around Summer Game Fest by going first with a State Of Play event on June 4. Despite serving as the stage for the long-awaited reveal of IO's James Bond project – officially titled *007 First Light* – it won't be remembered as a vintage PlayStation showing, with almost all of Sony's own studios failing to deliver, many still righting their ships following cancelled forays into service-game territory. Sucker Punch was the notable exception, although it was only with a short teaser for *Ghost Of Yotei* promising that a "gameplay deep dive" would be coming in July. There's no doubt that Sony would have wanted just such a thing as the headline segment for State Of Play, but clearly the studio wasn't ready.



Sony's offer of a surprise hardware reveal came in the form of a wireless fight stick codenamed Project Defiant, which will launch in 2026



It was left to others to carry the weight of expectation that always surrounds Sony's summer preview events. The announcement of *Nioh 3* was a surprise, but a bigger one was Capcom's reintroduction of *Pragmata* (see p72). In terms of debuts, the absence of Sony's in-house stable made it easier for projects from smaller studios to catch the eye. Koji Igarashi's *Bloodstained: The Scarlet Engagement*, a sequel to 2019's *Ritual Of The Night*, was an instant win for fans of 2D action games, while Grasshopper's latest, *Romeo Is A Dead Man*, took the prize for lighting up the room, its fizzing energy making just about everything else feel a bit lethargic. Not too far behind in the visual-energy stakes, though, came *Lumines Arise* from Tetsuya Mizuguchi's Enhance, reimagining the cult puzzler on a grander stage, applying the studio's trademark approach to audiovisual finesse to dazzling effect, particularly in VR. Broader PSVR2 support was limp, however, bar the surprise unveiling of *Thief VR: Legacy Of Shadow*, an update of the beloved stealth series.

Another game turning heads was *Stranger Than Heaven*, while *Ill* focused instead on turning stomachs

Old-fashioned showstoppers were also in short supply during the main Summer Game Fest jamboree on June 6, hosted by Geoff Keighley. That three of the games received with the greatest amount of enthusiasm within LA's YouTube Theater were sequels was no surprise, because familiarity always goes across well in such contexts. However, the teams behind *Mortal Shell II*, *Code Vein II* and

Atomic Heart II all have their work cut out, given the wobbly foundations on which they're building. As for original showings, *Felt That: Boxing*, which updates *Punch-Out* with puppets, instantly charmed all in attendance, while *Out Of Words* and *Lego Voyagers* put forward convincing arguments for

the power of co-op play. Another game capable of turning heads was Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio's *Stranger Than Heaven*, while Team Clout's gruesome-looking *Ill* focused instead on turning stomachs.

It was left to the Just One More Thing slot for the reveal of Capcom's *Resident Evil Requiem* to provide the wow moment that may make this particular SGF showcase remembered fondly in years

to come. Fortunately, the game appears to be shaking things up a little following on from 2021's disappointing *Village*, but firm details are still thin on the ground.

Microsoft's own summer game presentation, bookending the reveal of its Xbox Ally strategy, saw the announcement of *Grounded 2* from Obsidian and the first look at *Keeper*, a typically unorthodox-looking new game from Double Fine, as well as *Indiana Jones And The Great Circle* DLC in the form of *Order Of The Giants*. An unusually long segment of its show was handed over to *Clockwork Revolution*, a surprisingly ambitious steampunk firstperson RPG from inXile, while indie productions were highlighted with games such as *Super Meat Boy 3D*, *High On Life 2* and *Planet Of Lana II*. Concluding with a trailer for *Black Ops 7* unlike any *Call Of Duty* promo that has ever been assembled, Microsoft was keen to confirm that all of the games in its presentation will be playable on its Xbox Ally hardware.

As for Nintendo, aside from revealing *Splatoon Raiders* and showing off more *Donkey Kong Bananza*, it ignored SGF because it was preoccupied with setting new hardware sales records through the launch of its latest handheld. Microsoft will have been watching closely. ■

Resident Evil Requiem (top left) scooped the prize for surprise reveal of SGF, while *Hollow Knight: Silksong* (top right) was confirmed for release alongside the Xbox Ally launch – albeit with no date offered. *Lumines Arise* (above left) was a standout among indie offerings, and a standalone promo for *Donkey Kong Bananza* (above right) suggested it will be a highlight in 2025's Switch 2 calendar

Adjacency bonus

It's time to finally put the deck of cards to one side: tiles are the foundation of a **burgeoning new genre**

There's a new videogame genre emerging: the tile-synergy game. Think of 2022's *Dorfromantik*, in which your primary goal is to place tiles so that they synergise with the tiles surrounding them. As you line up matching edges correctly, spawning neighbourhoods, forests, rivers and fields, you're rewarded with points and more tiles. Blunted edges and incomplete quests will see you run out of tiles, and reach game over. This is the essence of the tile synergy game.

Positional bonuses are a familiar element of map-based strategy or management games such as *Civilization*, and they're a core mechanic in many boardgames, but in videogames this consideration hasn't typically been the central activity. So, what brought about the change?

We expect to see new genres branching off one archetypal game – the Soulslike, the Roguelike, whatever we're agreeing to call the titles riding in *Vampire Survivors*' slipstream – and it would be easy to imagine a similar origin point here, perhaps the aforementioned *Dorfromantik*. However, speaking to the developers of new and forthcoming tile-synergy games, we find their inspirations are vastly more varied.

For **Jean-Baptiste Oger** – game director on *Drop Duchy*, former Ubisoft designer and self-professed boardgame addict – the key influences are tile-laying tabletop games such as *Carcassonne* and *My City*. "You're creating 'something'

out of nothing," he says. "Even if you're not the most strategic person, there's a satisfaction in seeing your kingdom take shape as the game progresses." Oger says these emergent puzzles also offer no single optimal solution, so the player always has the option to take risks.

These two prongs mean that the rewards of playing tile-synergy games span a broad spectrum, from purely aesthetic to deeply strategic. *Drop Duchy* sits at the latter end of that spectrum: you work on a tight, *Tetris*-like board to build synergies that expand your resources, power military buildings and disempower your foes, and spend your resources crafting a deck of tiles that will serve you on boards and battles to come.

At the other end of the spectrum is *Planetiles*. Lead designer **Baltazar Jaworek** says it is "challenging but also relaxing and approachable", with a relaxed style and presentation that invites you to feel the 'flow'. While it has an element of challenge – you take on *Dorfromantik*-style quests to earn more tiles – there's also a sandbox mode, "where relaxation and building up the planet is the only goal".

On the face of it, these games don't look as though they belong in the same genre, but both designers speak about their intentions in very similar ways. With this shared core mechanic, which is easy to learn and difficult to master, players are able to select their desired level of

CROSS-POLLINATION
There's a parallel to tile-synergy games in the success of surprise hits *Loop Hero* and *Vampire Survivors*. In these examples, the design DNA of casual mobile gaming – short, rewarding sessions from minimal input – was presented to an audience used to more demanding activity. Likewise, tile-based mechanics aren't new, but they've previously only been allowed to take centre stage in boardgames. Videogames become more interesting when they look at adjacent media not as limited by their forms but uniquely shaped by them.

challenge, whether that's tuning the optimal flow state for *Planetiles* or striving for strategic excellence in *Drop Duchy*. There's also the thrill of taking risks and the excitement of discovery: you never know if you'll get exactly the tile you need for your plans, and discovering new interactions can alter the board in ways you may not have predicted.

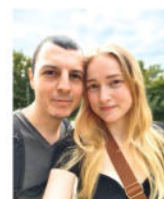
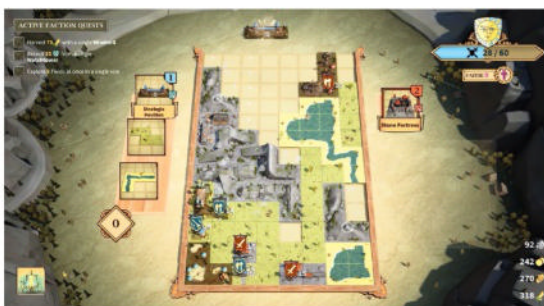
The recently launched *Backpack Battles* is an inventory-management autobattler that thrives on this principle in particular. The core of the action is arranging the tiles that are your weapons, armour and tools in your inventory before a fight that plays out automatically. Every decision is a compromise – whether to buy a new tile or save your gold for a later round, and how to optimise your layout. In addition to the predictability of any adjacency bonuses are synergies where items will merge and evolve into something new, shaking up the space – and tactics – you'd been working with. This additional complexity wasn't part of *Backpack Battles*' original design, according to developer PlayWithFurcifer co-founders Dorothea Kolhoff and Mario Janke. Instead, the idea came to them spontaneously. Yet the game wouldn't be the same without the dynamics of on-the-fly iterating and adapting it creates.

This is what is so enticing about the growth of the tile-synergy genre. More than a common mechanic of placing tiles, it offers a set of design principles that can be applied to a variety of game formats, synergising with their challenges and aesthetics to create something novel. The only remaining question is: where might these ideas be placed next? ■

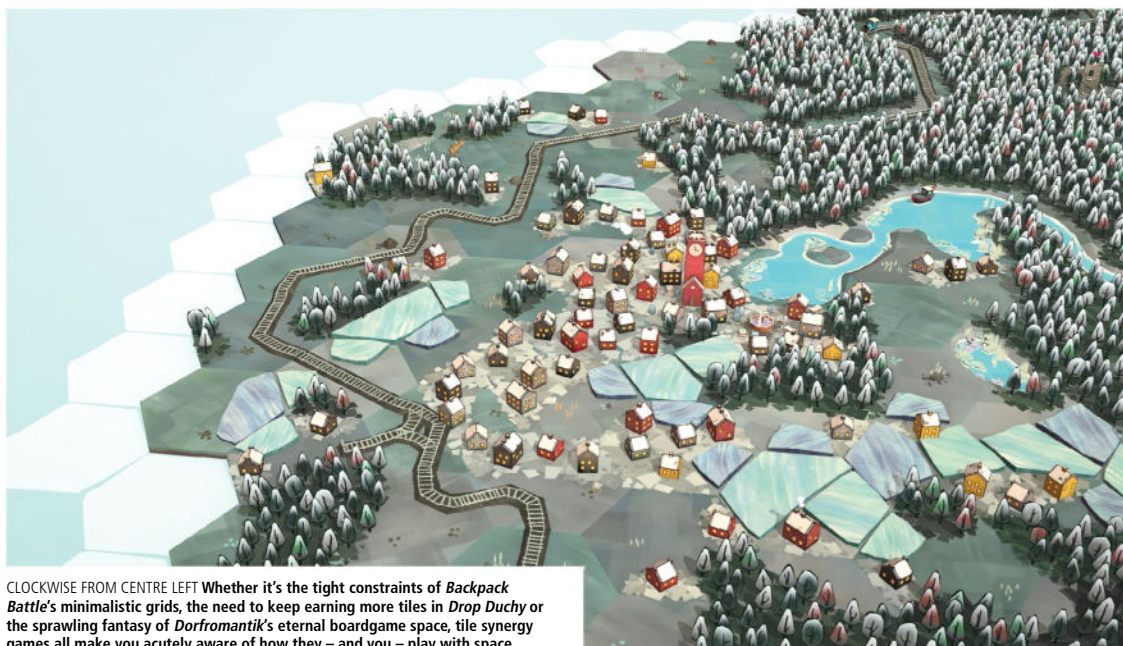




Power-ups, sparkles and giant asteroid storms in *Planetiles*: all the necessary kinds of feel-good feedback for your placement



Mario Janke and Dorothea Kolhoff, Baltazar Jaworek and Jean-Baptiste Oger



CLOCKWISE FROM CENTRE LEFT Whether it's the tight constraints of *Backpack Battle*'s minimalistic grids, the need to keep earning more tiles in *Drop Duchy* or the sprawling fantasy of *Dorfromantik*'s eternal boardgame space, tile synergy games all make you acutely aware of how they – and you – play with space

Sensible software?

How Swedish group **Aonic** is growing an ambitious stable of studios – and doing things differently from Embracer

The layoffs of recent years may be felt right across the game industry, but it's hard not to point the finger at Embracer Group for doing an outsized amount of damage in closing so many studios. In parallel with its overexpansion, though, is Aonic, a gaming group that, while also having origins in Sweden and emerging from seemingly nowhere to go on an acquisition spree, is taking another path.

Founded in 2021, Aonic now owns 12 companies, including VR specialist nDreams and Otherside Entertainment, the studio behind Warren Spector's *Thick As Thieves*, and has continued to increase its capital, including raising €152m in December. These numbers may seem modest compared to Embracer's, but that is also the point, since Aonic's strategy is more focused on investing in small and medium-sized studios.

"Embracer bought great companies," Aonic co-founder **Olliver Heins** says, "but companies on peak, with thousands of employees, where it's hard to make something better, and all they could do was optimise by downsizing." With the exception of the aforementioned studios with profile, Aonic's acquisitions have flown under the radar, partly to prevent a hike in target prices but also because it has been selective with the studios it wants in its mission to address a gap in the market.

"I met my co-founder Paul Schempp when I was advising on acquisitions at [VC fund] MTG, and there were some

deals with great but small companies that just needed someone to help them grow," Heins explains. "But whenever Paul or I suggested such a deal, they always said it was too small because they needed something that could impact the share price." One of these deals involved Lithuanian studio TutoToons, which had published over 100 mobile apps with profit margins in excess of 50 per cent but never ventured outside of its native region. Leaving MTG, Heins worked with Schempp to create Aonic and bought the studio. Since then, Aonic's acquisitions

have created opportunities for UK developer Milky Tea and Canada-based BKOM. Each has lots of experience in work-for-hire projects, but only now are the studios able to build their own games.

Another key part of the strategy is that Aonic doesn't just own studios but

also established its own publishing arm last year. Based in London, Megabit is the publisher of all of the group's games, and also inks deals with thirdparty developers. Again, Heins sees this as a way to address some of the raw deals faced by indie studios, which Aonic's developers had also seen firsthand. "When we acquired Milky Tea, they had two early prototypes and they showed us an offer from a publisher, and we were shocked," Heins says. "I think it was the meanest deal I've seen in my life. They wanted to pay 40 per cent of the development costs but wanted 80 per

WE WANT TO BE TOGETHER
'Synergy' may feel like a disposable buzzword in certain contexts, but Heins uses it freely, and for Aonic it has actual meaning in the form of projects that are spread across its studios. "For example, *Grit & Valor* is a PC game developed by Milky Tea in Liverpool, but the console versions are currently being done by BKOM in Canada," Heins says. "And there's a VR version developed by nDreams. Then the game is published by our team in London." Conversely, he argues that the lack of synergy that existed between the companies Embracer acquired during its boom period was also a factor behind the problems that ultimately lay ahead.

cent of the revenues – and they didn't want to guarantee any marketing or even payments. We had another game, which won a lot of awards and had 90+ on Metacritic but didn't sell, and when we reached out to the publisher, they said they have ten games each year but only focus on the five they believe in the most."

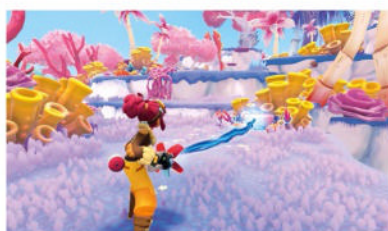
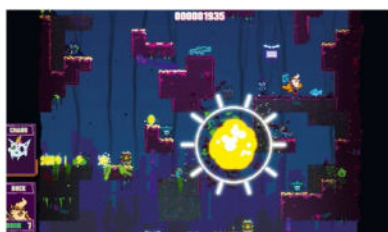
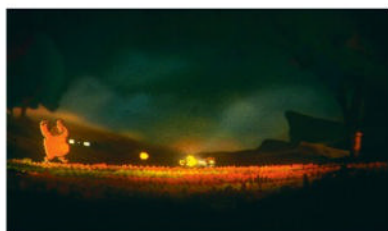
Heins believes that being both publisher and studio owner is a key differentiator, since it's not just about revenue but also contributing to the value creation of the studio and its IP. "For us, it wouldn't make sense to release a game but neglect it, because if the game doesn't do well, the studio has no value – and if the studio has no value, that's bad for us. So we have a very different perspective on how we handle studios."

Which isn't to say that Aonic hasn't run into difficulties. After its acquisition in 2023, nDreams underwent restructuring last year and has since seen two internal studios closed (albeit with another one opening). It was in response, Heins says, to the evolving VR market. "We wanted nDreams to be its own EA or Ubisoft just for VR, and the market simply isn't big enough yet. Lots of people actually changed within the group from the restructuring – just here, in London, four people have joined – so we filled the majority of open positions here as well." It may also be too soon to see if Aonic's smaller bets will pay off, even if Heins' ambitions are modestly for "a safe second base". But given the tumultuous consequences of mismanagement across the industry as a whole, an example of what appears to be sustainable growth cannot help but feel refreshing. ■

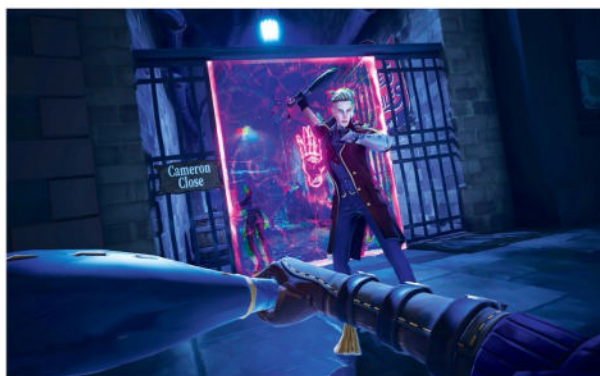


Aonic co-founder and CPO Olliver Heins

Aonic's acquisitions include work-to-hire studios now making their own games, such as BKOM, which is creating a hack-and-slash spinoff from the *Pathfinder* RPG series



Megabit's third game includes *Omur* (top) and *Clawpunk* (centre). Heins: "They usually have a shorter lead time than our first-party games, but a company like Aonic has a responsibility to give these people a chance." Although owned by Aonic, Tiny Roar used Kickstarter to expand island-hopping adventure *Lou's Lagoon* (above)



ABOVE *Thick As Thieves* (see E407) is in production at Otherside Entertainment. Game director Warren Spector is the highest-profile name within Aonic's portfolio of studios. BELOW Milky Tea's realtime tactics game *Grit & Valor: 1949* launched on PC via Steam in March this year but will also be arriving on Epic's Games Store and consoles in August



WITHIN REACH

Making a grab for greatness



Given virtual reality's apparent pivot to more casual and social-based games predominantly on Meta's platform, that nDreams' next project, *Reach* (see p28), is gunning to be a triple-A blockbuster on a par with *Half-Life: Alyx* seems risky. Indeed, it's a project that Heins admits might not have been greenlit had it been proposed here in 2025. "But we saw the quality and there was never a question of *Reach* being scrapped," he says. "It's more than just a product – it also shows off our tech and what we can build on top of Unreal. Because, if not nDreams, then who is pushing VR to become the market it deserves to be?"

SELECT TYPE

SAD CLOWN

POSSESSED

INTRUDER

DISTORTION

MOVED/MOVING

MISSING

EXTRA

BACK

Watch out for the mysterious sad clown who's infecting the paintings with its glumness. It's one of the easiest anomalies to spot, but should provide a little comic relief between the trickier challenges

MOTION PICTURES

A cursory glance is never enough in this art-based playground

Having already invited us to put our fingers on famous paintings in *Please, Touch The Artwork*, **Thomas Waterzooi** now wants us to examine them up close. In contrast to the hands-on playfulness of his previous title and its sequel, this time he wanted to make something "horror-ish", he explains, and turned to the dour and disconcerting work of Edward Hopper. "Hopper is famous for his depictions of loneliness and urban isolation," Waterzooi says. "[His] paintings are often voyeuristic and we're culturally taught that it's impolite to look into people's private lives, hence we feel strange doing so. I wanted to amplify

these feelings by adding animation, sound and some form of overarching narrative."

That narrative casts you as the night watch at the magical Museum Of Animated Modern Art, where the canvases come to life. Your job is to keep an eye on them via surveillance cameras and report anomalies, such as objects moving, distorting or appearing where they shouldn't. In essence, this is a game of spot the difference, Waterzooi says, where you must memorise the composition of each painting. "I'm making the player study art without realising," he smiles. "My goal is not to educate, but to inspire. And hopefully get some players to visit the paintings in real life." ■



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



Getty, Ailah Anderson

"It's more like monkeys and typewriters. **You just keep doing it and eventually, one day, they're dead.**"

To movie director **Alex Garland**, beating tricky *Elden Ring* bosses is more a matter of persistence than worrying about getting good



"Our goal remains the same... so, yes, whenever possible, **that means the full game on cartridge.**"

Does the Switch 2 game-storage revolution begin with PM Studios' **Michael Yum**?



"It's about respecting the players who still care about owning something real. **Physical isn't dead. Not for us.**"

Full games on cartridges, is it? Evercade boss **Andrew Byatt** doesn't need any persuading

"When we did playtesting, a young girl said, **'I really, really, really hate the poop.'** So we removed the poop."

For this month's **Shuhei Yoshida** Soundbytes Corner: how focus testing turned *Ape Escape*'s monkey deposits into banana skins



ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



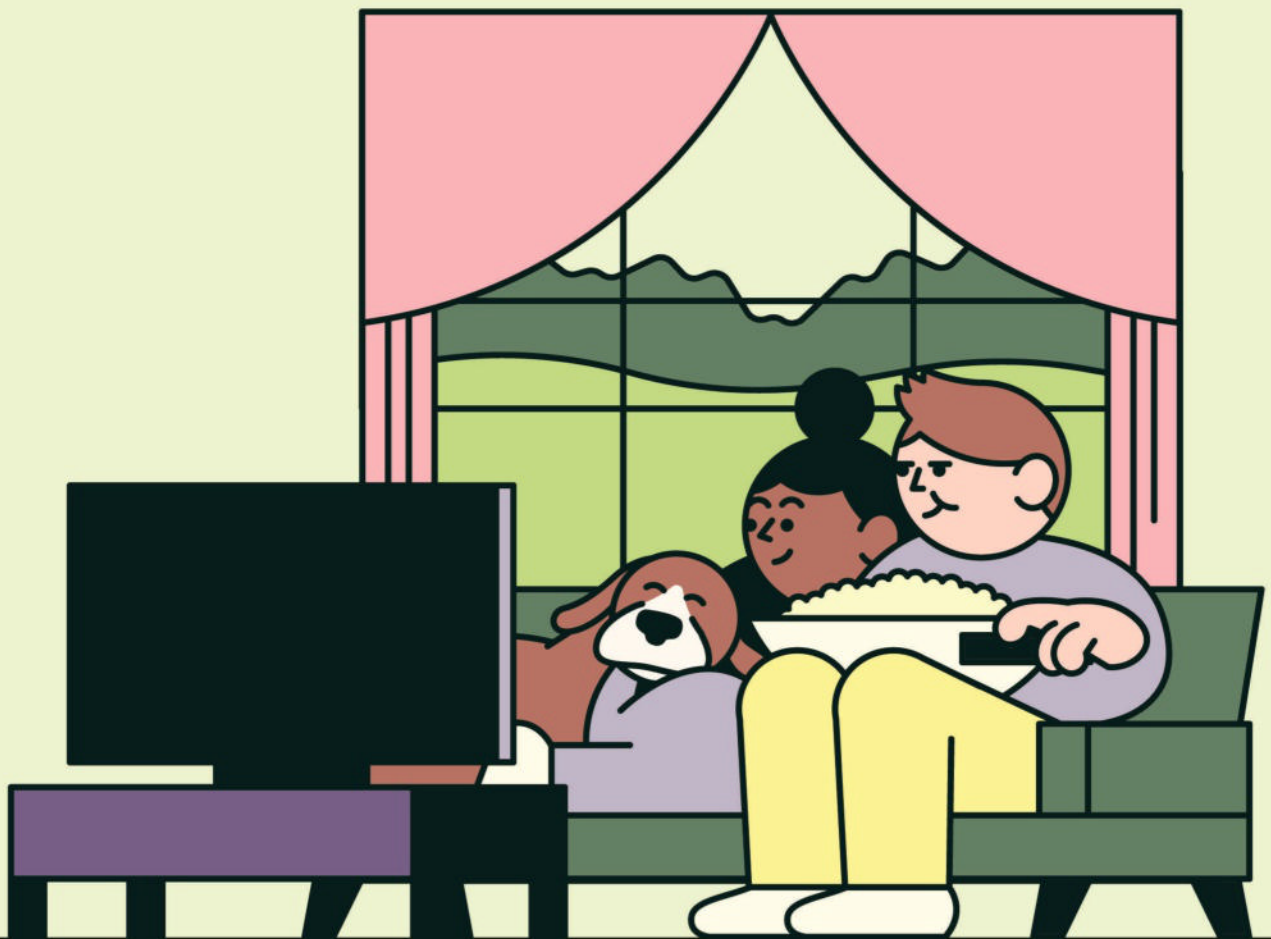
Game Tattoo Assassins
Manufacturer Data East, exA-Arcadia

"Prepare yourself", read the blurb for *Tattoo Assassins* when the coin-op was originally being readied for launch in 1994. "This isn't just a game!" And in one respect it was correct: it was also an object lesson in how *not* to create a clone of a beloved franchise – in this case, *Mortal Kombat*. Created by Data East's pinball division, the game's roster of fighters (sample names: Truck, Derek) have tattoos that give them special powers in battle. In *Fatality*-style finishers, nothing is off the table: an opponent can be transformed into a tortoise, a squirrel or even a human-sized hot dog wearing trainers (which immediately runs off the screen, screaming). Or they might have their clothes removed or have an ocean liner dropped onto their head ("Eat ship and die!" the game cackles). Perhaps most telling of all is the inclusion of not just one way of launching farts at your opponent but several, including one finishing variant that creates a cone-like cloud of flaming gas. *Tattoo Assassins* was received so poorly in tests that it never made it into production. That exA-Arcadia is resurrecting it for release in 2025 is evidence of the game's cult following – and for the arcade scene's apparently unending desire to march to its own beat.



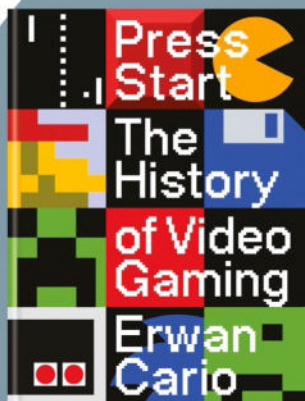
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BOOK

Press Start

bit.ly/cario-world

Erwan Cario's tome promises "the complete history of videogaming", just as the original edition did (but in French) in 2011. Given the speed at which the medium evolves, that makes the book itself practically a historical artefact by this point. This English translation is based on the 2023 update, and it's fascinating to see which highlights Cario picks from the intervening period. VR, *Fortnite*, Switch, the rush of indies driven by Steam's open doors and more each get a two-page section – which is fairly brisk, but we're most interested by Cario's overarching argument, breaking videogame history into discrete eras (*Pong*, Cartridge, Nintendo, Genres, and so on). Following on from 2004–12's 'Age Of Movement', the period since is characterised as 'The Age Of Excess'.



VIDEO

The Race For Santa's Software

bit.ly/twas-brillig

Freshly retrieved from the BBC Archive and uploaded to YouTube, this 1984 episode of *Commercial Breaks* is a fascinating window into the UK game industry of the time. It follows two "software houses", Manchester's Ocean and Liverpool's Imagine, over the course of multiple months in the runup to Christmas. Only one of the two survives, as Imagine is brought down by the ambition of 'megagame' *Bandersnatch*. Yes, it's the inspiration for the *Black Mirror* episode of the same name, and despite the slightly stuffy telling here, the real story's drama burns almost as bright.

APP

Climate Station

bit.ly/climate-station

Well, this wasn't the summer shadow drop we'd expected. Sony's collaboration with the UN is a free educational experience that runs through a century of climate data in clear terms somewhere on the Attenborough-science-museum spectrum, before projecting ahead. The presentation varies between relatively dry (graphs and Open University-ish animated videos) and some stylish 3D visualisations. Climate Station doesn't have to be experienced in VR, but being able to spin a globe while watching a year's worth of temperature spikes and weather events does help bring the facts to life. For those of us with a sense of doom about the environment but a GCSE-level science education, this is valuable stuff, and sobering enough to get our PSVR2's lenses misting up.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

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

ACCESSORY

Joy-Con 2 Wheel

bit.ly/wheely-good

For anyone still wondering if *Welcome Tour* is actually an interactive advert: just a few hours after wandering the valleys and peaks of its colossal hardware recreations, we find ourselves online, placing an order for the sole Switch 2 accessory not already in our possession.

Clearly, all those explanations about magnet and rubber-pad placement made *some* lasting impression. In fairness, once the wheels arrive, Nintendo's industrial-design wisdom is also evident in the hands. Each adds some welcome extra bulk to a detached Joy-Con 2 – especially the chunky shoulder buttons – and a textured grip, in line with the rest of the hardware's matte finish.



continue

Collective action

SAG-AFTRA agrees a deal with game companies, almost a year after its strike began

Fund & games

UK government launches a three-year, £30m scheme to support the foundation of new videogame studios

Shopping Kart

More than 3.5m Switch 2 units sold in four days, a new record for Nintendo hardware

Full deck

Balatro developer LocalThunk has finally 100 per cent completed his own game

quit

Blocks knocked off

Following Riot's closure of Hypixel Studios, *Hytale* joins the list of cancelled *Edge* cover games

Non-finisher

Bungie FPS *Marathon* is delayed indefinitely, after "passionate" (read: negative) feedback to playtesting

Lost touch

Embracer Group report reveals it's cut its headcount by over 1,800 in a year

Failure to launch

Splitgate 2 and *MindsEye* launches followed by layoffs at their respective studios



bit.ly/edgesky
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DISPATCHES

SEPTEMBER



Issue 412

Dialogue

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



Memories locked

Now that I'm a chap in my late 30s, it is not uncommon to get nostalgia for games I played growing up. I've realised that, after about ten to 15 years of not playing a game I previously enjoyed, I begin to get quite a longing to relive it once again. I recently went back and revisited such delights as *Terranigma*, *Jet Force Gemini* and *Super Mario Land II*. All of these still worked on original hardware, and all were amazing experiences.

I then look at my PS5, which already has a disc drive that is dodgy and often won't eject games unless I stand the console up. I look at all my physical PS5 games and note with some worry that disc-free consoles are seemingly becoming a bigger presence. I look at my all-digital Steam library, currently maintained by a seemingly responsible company but only a corporate takeover away from being altered irrevocably. I look at my children, only just starting to get into games now, and how my son is loving playing *Bowser's Fury*. I look at this and also the games I'm playing now and wonder, in 15 years' time, when (presumably) I feel nostalgia for these games and not the ones I played as a child, will I be able to access them? Will my kids be able to easily access the games they grew up with? Will the seemingly inevitable march toward an all-digital future allow us to easily experience those delights we currently enjoy, or is it going to be like streaming and either hard to access or carved into a million fiefdoms, all demanding payment for access?

I already look at experiences like *Destiny 2*, where I enjoyed the original crop of raids, but now all of which are sunsetted, seemingly never to return. If nostalgia grabs me there, I simply will not be able to access that ever again. It's also relatively easy to emulate games from the '90s and early '00s, either through official channels like

Nintendo Switch Online or others, but as technology has marched on, even that avenue seems less likely to be available as hardware becomes harder to emulate correctly. Part of gaming that I personally enjoy is reliving those nuggets of time every so often, and I worry I may be shut out.

Justin Davis

A crumb of hope is that today's games are being launched into a different environment from the one that existed only, say, five years ago. For example, Microsoft has just pledged that all of its new devices will be able to play your existing Xbox library. In the meantime, have an **Edge** T-shirt (but keep in mind that we cannot guarantee its wearability for one year, let alone 15 or whatever).

"I was 46 hours into *Cyberpunk 2077* when I registered that the game has a Metro system"

Crate expectations

I have just spent 50 hours with *Cyberpunk 2077*, and this got me thinking. Is one of the great but under-appreciated joys of large and multifarious games simply that they offer tremendous scope for obtuseness? When

there are so many options and mechanics, it is possible to overlook one totally.

I was 46 hours into *Cyberpunk* when I registered for the first time that the game has a Metro system. My moment of revelation came when I was plodding along the street to my next objective marker, as one does in open-world titles, and then went, "Oooh, a Metro station. Fancy that! I wonder if you can take the train."

I remember circa 2018 playing *Breath Of The Wild* for about a week and then, in a moment of vertiginous revelation, realising that it might be interesting to ride horses.

However, I am only a player, not a theorist or designer, and thinking about games can perhaps be taken too far. For example, I cleave faithfully to the old, pre-theoretical certainty that the optimal way to play a game like *Cyberpunk* or *Deus Ex* is to attempt



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fellow Edge readers

stealth for 30 seconds, get spotted, and then cower behind a crate till I have killed every guard with a combination of ranged magic/hacking attacks and the sniper rifle.

Neil Sewell-Rutter

We are right there beside you, Neil. If there is a more effective way of tackling complex stealth challenges than by accidentally drawing attention to yourself by letting off a shot and then hiding behind some bins, frankly we don't want to know about it.

The long and the long of it

For some god-forsaken reason I have decided to commit to finishing *Metaphor: Refantazio*. I have yearned for so long for the older, less actiony *Final Fantasy* games, and wanted to reward anyone willing to create a top-quality turn-based RPG with a slightly more sensible plot. I'm enjoying it, don't get me wrong, but why is it so determined to get in its own way? I love working to the in-game calendar, but I've recently been given 20 in-game days in which to complete a major objective that I dutifully completed in... one.

As a parent of a wee 'un approaching her second birthday, I'd love to have 19 days to myself to just hang out. But figuring out how to spend 19 days in a game is just an absolute chore – especially when it involves picking between tasks such as sitting on a bench to gain 'wisdom', or traversing to an optional dungeon that follows an extremely similar structure to the last three I polished off.

Using the time to form stronger bonds with the other characters is entirely worthwhile, and I'm thoroughly enjoying the main plot when the game finally gets back to it again. And the battle system is magnificent, particularly when it forces you to understand character synergies to beat tougher bosses. But does this thing really need to be 60–70 hours long? I look at a certain other (**Edge** 10) expedition's 25–30-hour play time on How Long To

Beat, and wonder if I should have just held out a little longer to scratch that itch.

John Saunders

Fast-forward options for unnecessarily drawn-out JRPGs, hmm? According to our next correspondent, it's all in hand.

Visions of the future

I wanted to send an optimistic letter from the future, from a fellow gaming enthusiast. Look, I'll cut to the chase: everything was all right in the end – we still play videogames. It's just... different. It was indeed a Japanese two-horse race for a while, but other players joined, specifically in the handheld market, which spurred on healthy competition for the home console monopoly.

There is one casualty of progress, however, and that is, as you have probably guessed, physical media. But every action has a reaction, and what was previously a niche with companies such as Limited Run blossomed into an expansive counter-culture. Collecting didn't die!

Another positive has been the realisation that graphical fidelity was not the future of our hobby. The triple-A market did eventually pivot to innovation around in-game AI, a renaissance of physics systems, and ultimately a favouring of substance over style. Double-A actually takes up more of the conversation and yearly release cycle nowadays anyway. No more déjà vu, feeling like you're playing the same game in a different skin. In addition, double-A has kept gaming at an equilibrium of price that is sustainable for both consumers and developers.

And, yes, that is probably a good segue to the elephant in the room: AI. I'd be lying if I said it didn't have a proliferative effect on the industry. But we eventually found a happy medium. For an analogy, think BD1 from *Jedi Survivor*. AI for budding junior developers, or even seasoned veteran code gurus, is BD1 – a buddy that makes things easier and efficient. A supportive measure.

Now and again we still see generative AI pop up in artwork from smaller companies and on F2P platforms, but the big players were soon drowned out by the decrying masses, and now avoid the heat most of the time. The pencil has remained in the artist's hand, but it was not an easy fight.

A new legislative act was born around legal entities in the voice-acting sector, and whilst actors in the videogame industry have seen a reduction in earnings, we're now starting to see a resurgence as they utilise contemporary revenue streams, by renting AI replications of their images and/or voices (for which they retain ownership) to publishers and developers for a fee. This, combined with traditional voice-acting and motion-capture gigs, means that actors are still in the game, and we're better off for it!

You might be interested to hear that the obsession with live-service games, just like the gold rush of the 19th century, eventually dissipated. Now videogame companies have coined the term 'customer circumstance curation' – or CCC for short. Whilst this could be discarded as more marketing tripe, it has in fact had quite a profound effect on product development. Games of 15 to 20 hours in length have been normalised again, rather than lambasted as lacking value for money, and even expansive RPGs now have time-saving options as an industry standard. Menu options allow the removal of 'filler content' – eg, fetch quests and collectables – from the game/map entirely. We have streamlined dialogue options and distinctions between levelling systems – amazing stuff, I'm sure you'll agree.

Finally: game preservation. Let's just say there are major gaming museums in New York, LA, London, Edinburgh, Tokyo and Krakow. Yes, that's right, there's no more doubt – gaming is forever.

Martin Seary

Hold on, does this mean that you've read this reply already? (If so, please can you send back some winning Lotto results?) ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Randomisation is the enemy of artistic expression. Luke Rhinehart's cult novel *The Diceman* (1971) depicts a psychiatrist who outsources his life choices to the roll of a die, but the writer himself (real name George Cockcroft), who had experimented with the idea in his own life, didn't take random choices while composing the story itself. It mattered that one thing came before another, that the novel had a designed narrative shape.

Randomisation is also the essence of artistic freedom. The aural content of any given performance of John Cage's piano piece, "4'33", is left entirely to chance. William Burroughs cut up pieces of writing and arranged the pieces in random new ways to create unforeseen texts. Composers of ambient or generative music may use pseudo-random pitch generators. To delegate some artistic choices to the roll of a metaphorical die can be a liberating route to new ideas.

The Janus-faced nature of chance is most clearly distilled in the videogame genre known as the Roguelike, which became fashionable again a decade or so ago and is still, alas, with us. I say 'alas' because I don't get on with Roguelikes at all. I once spent a very entertaining few weeks playing *The Binding Of Isaac: Rebirth* co-operatively with a friend, but the pleasure of that was more about enjoying the weird graveyard humour of the game with someone else than with the form of the game itself.

My issue, or defect, is that a Roguelike experience very rarely feels sufficiently designed for me to care about it. If it's true, as one will find suggested, that the genre became popular primarily among indie developers because procedural generation and random repetition eased their workloads – why craft an elaborate linear experience when the computer can just shuffle the deck for you every time? – then that seems a legitimate reason to employ such elements, but not to force me to enjoy them. If Mike Singleton could cram the vast landscape of



My issue, or defect, is that a Roguelike experience rarely feels sufficiently designed for me to care about it

The Lords Of Midnight into a ZX Spectrum's 48K of memory without it randomly changing every playthrough, I don't want to listen to any excuses from his lesser imitators.

Sure, sure, it can be fun to 'Live. Die. Repeat', as the tagline for Tom Cruise sci-fi classic *Edge Of Tomorrow* has it, and which captures the essence of Roguelike gameplay, except that the repetition isn't reliable. You know what's more fun? To live, die, and repeat something that you know is going to be the same every time – whether it's a *Souls* boss fight or a lap in *GT7* – because improving one's performance through repetition is the

essence of practice in all human activities, and a joy unto itself.

I regret that my Roguelike allergy thus prevents me from enjoying games such as *Returnal* – which I otherwise would, knowing my love of Housemarque's design aesthetics. And yes, I understand that some scholars insist on a difference between a Roguelike and a Roguelite, *Returnal* being the latter, because there is some persistency between runs. But to me this is angels-on-a-pinhead stuff. Design me the game yourselves, cowards!

Such feelings bubbled up once again when I began playing *Blue Prince*, which is in many ways a beautiful and innovative game: the dramatic eeriness of exploring a human structure with no one in it reminded me of some of my most beloved times in the early *Tomb Raiders*. But, oh no, it's also a Roguelike, or at least -lite, and one which is also a little bit too smug about being one. After all, the game, rather preciously, strongly suggests you take notes during your explorations, ideally using a real-life writing implement in a journal – I assume a hipster notebook such as a Moleskine would be aesthetically ideal for the task. "But," I want to protest, "I'm literally using a computer right now! And if there's one thing computers are good at, it's remembering things for me."

Another thing computers are good at these days is illegally ingesting vast quantities of other people's artworks and then procedurally generating plagiarised mashups of them. I wonder if the proper disgust at this kind of 'AI' felt by all right-thinking creative people might in turn lead to a waning in popularity of the Roguelike genre? After all, if I wanted to shoot people in a randomly generated space every time, I could probably ask Grok to make that garbage for me. Perhaps we will again start to place more value on lovingly authored environments arranged in a meaningful way, and leave the robots to play dice among themselves.

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



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ALEX SPENCER

The Outer Limits

Journeys to the farthest reaches of interactive entertainment

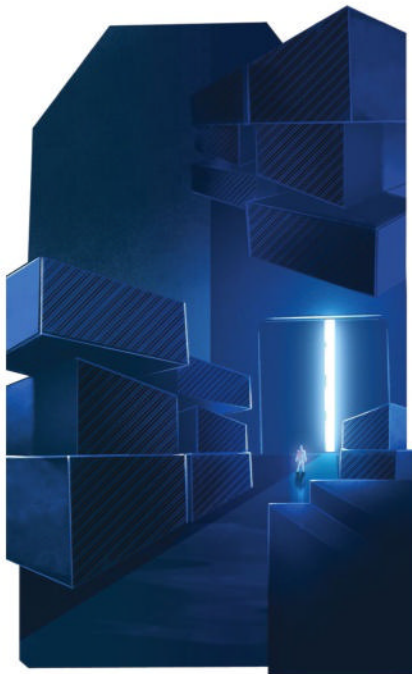
Since the first paragraph of the first instalment of *The Outer Limits*, I've been joking about how much time I now seem to spend in derelict warehouses, generally in the vicinity of London's Docklands. So it's a little hard not to feel as though I'm being targeted by Sage & Jester, a new immersive-theatre company whose debut show is titled, simply, *Storehouse*.

Confusingly, that's also the name of the Deptford venue where it takes place, the most warehouse-y warehouse I have ever laid eyes upon. It's an enormous slab of angled metal painted sickly green, set in a 21,000-square-metre patch of concrete being gradually reclaimed by nature. Apparently the building itself was formerly used to store Rupert Murdoch's newspapers, but you can't exactly hold that against it.

Storehouse, the show, riffs on that history directly. It begins with a dozen of us ushered into an anodyne waiting room, with *Severance*-style 'core principles' on the walls and tabloids scattered across the tables. I pick one up, expecting a bit of worldbuilding flavour, and realise they're actually today's papers, with the Iran-Israel conflict all over the front pages. As a reminder of the world beyond these repurposed walls, it seems designed to discomfit – a brave decision, perhaps, but not one justified by the 90 minutes that follow.

A TV, which until now has been showing GB News, switches over to a recorded message to establish *Storehouse*'s premise. This place, we're all told, has been sealed off from the rest of the world since 1983, the birth of the modern Internet. Inside, every last bit of digital data produced since has been transcribed and stored in physical form, via a process that involves books and, for some reason, a mycelial network.

The group is then led through a series of rooms – a messy book-binder's studio, a kind of cotton-wool temple, a cavernous bird's nest where books are woven into the branches – and exposited at by this storehouse's



The effect is like *Fallout*'s vault-opening intro, greeting us with a vista that's equal parts post-apocalyptic and beautiful

wardens, who've not been outside in over 40 years, and are functionally immortal (something to do with the mushrooms). The sets are beautifully appointed, if a little *Crystal Maze* at times, but the actors are burdened by a script casting them not so much as characters but rather primary-school teachers leading their students on a tour of a local factory.

It's hard to follow the intricacies of the plot, which seems to involve multiple shifts of allegiance, but there can be no doubt about the intended theme. At some point, my plus-one elbows me and whispers the immortal

Garth Marengi line: "I know writers who use subtext, and they're all cowards". *Storehouse*'s message is not only repeatedly stated aloud, but is exactly the one you'd predict from this setup: misinformation is bad, and spreads easily on the Internet and social media, making the world an increasingly dark place, but we need to find hope somehow.

This argument is, at least, made much more elegantly by the staging than the dialogue. After a climactic scene around an inky fountain, where the actors directly ask the audience what gives them hope ("Pizza!" "Beer!" "Animals!"), the doors are opened, and the dark dissipates. We're still inside the storehouse but have noclipped outside of the sets we've been exploring for the past hour, their sackcloth construction visible from the raised gantry. It's a chance to appreciate just how enormous this space is, one big room 50 feet tall – before another set of doors open, and the June sun comes flooding in.

The effect is like *Fallout*'s vault-opening intro, greeting us with a vista that's equal parts post-apocalyptic and beautiful. The storehouse backs directly onto the Thames, and among the scrubland Sage & Jester has constructed a bar (it's immersive theatre – there's *always* a bar). There are snacks, drinks and at one point an urban fox frolicking on the riverbank. Pizza! Beer! Animals!

Let's take Marengi's advice, and ditch the subtext. This is what I've been seeking over the past few years of warehouse visitations: stories that can be told by, and about, spaces rather than people. (Or, at least, not people who are currently present in the space.) You could probably do some armchair psychoanalysis on why this became personally important after 2020, but it's something I first encountered well before that, in a medium where environmental storytelling is so often a practical necessity. Was this a pleasure I was taught by videogames – or one that drew me to them?

Alex Spencer is now *Edge*'s contributing editor, but that hasn't affected his desire to ask the big, slightly stoner-y questions.

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THE BEST, BIGGEST AND OTHERWISE NOTABLE
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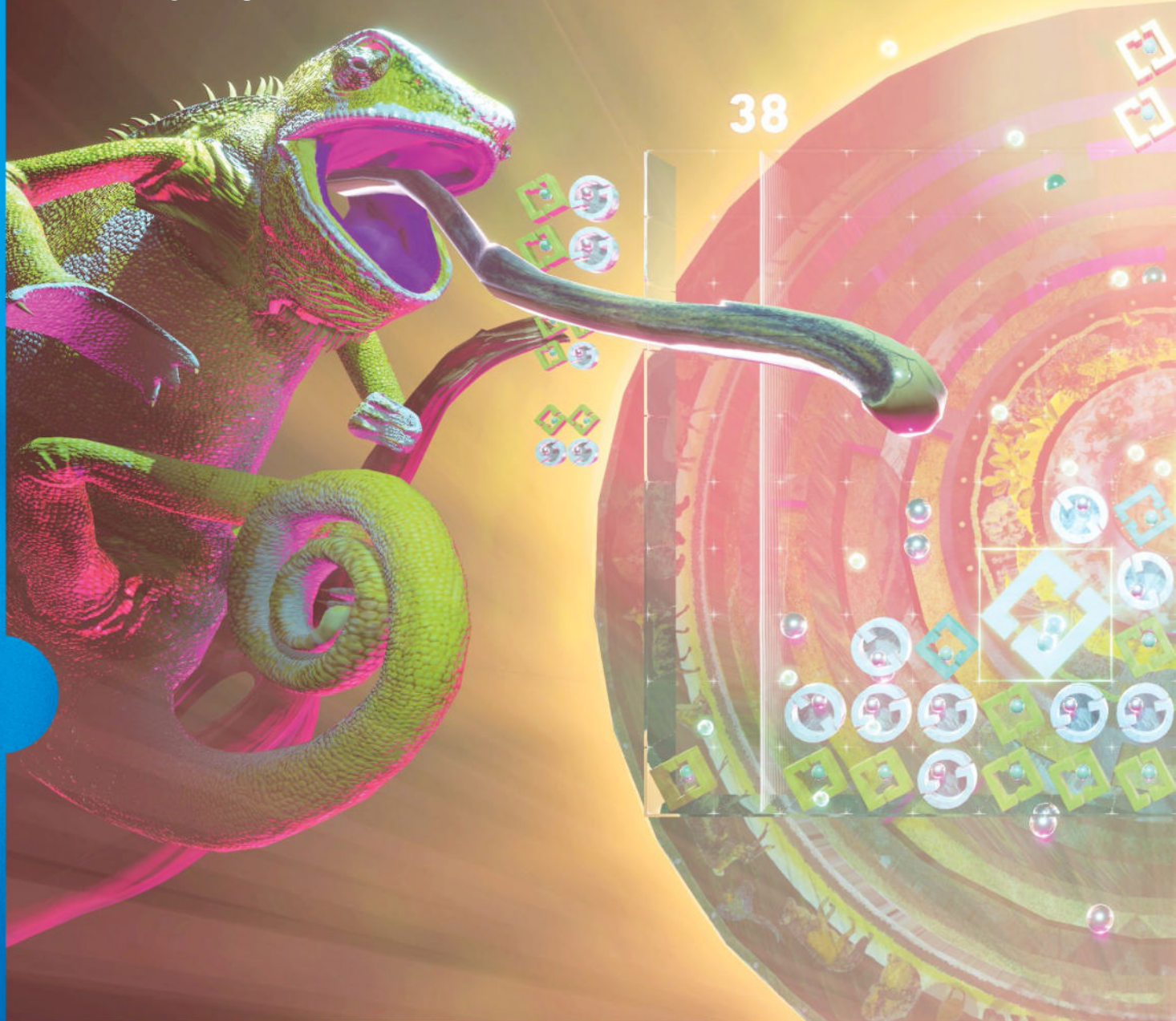
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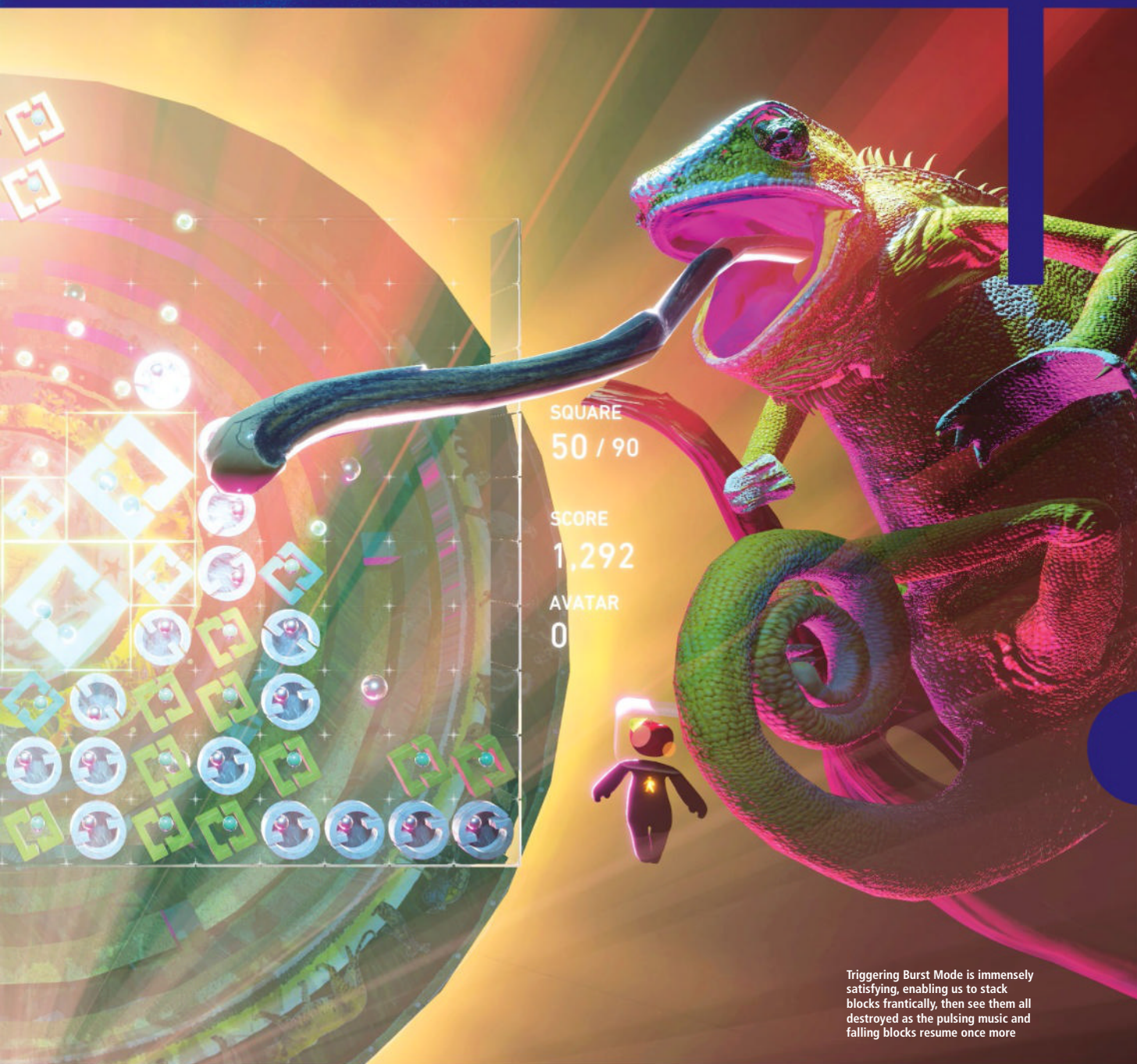


LUMINES ARISE

Developer Enhance, Monstars **Publisher** Enhance **Format** PC, PS5, PSVR2 **Release** Autumn

Concluding our *Lumines Arise* demo session on a couch in the middle of a crowded venue, it takes a few seconds to remember where we are, as we readjust to a reality that is not dictated by falling blocks and pounding rhythms. For the past 15 minutes, we have been utterly spellbound. It won't surprise anyone to learn that this effect was achieved by Enhance, the studio founded by Rez designer Tetsuya Mizuguchi.

This latest fusion of music and play builds upon the foundations of *Tetris Effect*, Enhance's 2018 reimagining of the classic puzzle game as an audiovisual extravaganza. We fill up a grid with two-by-two squares, each segment of which is one of two colours, as they fall from the top of the screen. A white timeline bar clears any squares of matching colours at a steady cadence, scoring points and building up our combo meter. Wrinkles soon appear in the form of flashing blocks,



Triggering Burst Mode is immensely satisfying, enabling us to stack blocks frantically, then see them all destroyed as the pulsing music and falling blocks resume once more

which occur at random and can be linked to matching colours to create long chains, cleared by the timeline to net us a hefty number of points. Our tactical efforts are initially hindered, though, by the sheer density of information thrown at us.

At first, a silhouetted figure dominates the background as a woman sings "I'm facing my fears" over a bed of electro pop. Just as we acclimatise to it, skeletal hands materialise over our grid, the falling blocks morphing into wireframe cubes and pulsing balls of white electricity. The music shifts instantly, going from inspirational power ballad to a soundscape of angular beeps and boops. The biggest surprise in our demo is saved for the last stage, however. Booming dance music and choral chants fill our headphones as two dancing

lizards bracket the grid, the screen awash with bright, psychedelic colours. We begin to edge dangerously close to the top of the screen as non-matching blocks pile on top of each other, but find an out in the form of Burst Mode. After clearing enough rows to charge the ability, we squeeze both triggers, sending any errant blocks surrounding completed two-by-two squares flying into the air. The music fades out, seemingly holding its breath as we create progressively larger squares, the timeline temporarily halted to facilitate our frenzied construction, before it all snaps back into action and wipes our handiwork away, the suspended squares falling back down to occupy the negative space below. Seeing a master craftsman such as Mizuguchi in full flow, all you can really do is step back and marvel.



NIOH 3

Developer/publisher Koei Tecmo (Team Ninja) Format PC, PS5 Release Early 2026

As delicious as the combat in the *Nioh* games often is, we felt like we'd had our fill after two, and Team Ninja seemed to have moved on as well, slightly yet significantly changing direction with *Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty*. After SGG's surprise announcement of *Nioh 3*, though, the first demo has us licking our lips again.

All feels familiar until we're invited to switch fighting styles and our character transforms at the press of a button. If there was ever a sense that *Nioh* was a crossbreed of *Dark Souls* and *Ninja Gaiden*, it's heightened here, as our samurai avatar changes costumes faster than Superman to become a masked assassin. Rather than a mere outfit choice, this heralds an entirely new approach to combat (and makes the character transitions of *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* feel laboured in comparison). The methodical ki pulsing that defined the way of the samurai switches to a quick spin that moves you around an opponent, encouraging you to get behind them for increased damage output. Aerial attacks are more dynamic thanks to a flurry of airborne kicks you can unleash, and you can momentarily stun foes with a quick shuriken throw. The contrast is great indeed, allowing for major tactical shifts mid-battle.

An even bigger shift comes after we complete the short introductory level and step into the first

main mission. Like Link gazing out over the Great Plateau, we're treated to a view much broader than any seen in the series before, though we're not quite as free in this case; Team Ninja has explained that *Nioh 3* isn't an open-world game, it's more like an open-field game, with wider self-contained areas. It's enough to provide a range of possible paths from our vantage point, however, with points of interest in each, and no single critical route forward.

All feels familiar until we're invited to switch fighting styles and our character transforms

There's an obvious conclusion to jump to here: if *Nioh* was Team Ninja's answer to *Dark Souls*, *Nioh 3* might be its *Elden Ring*. There's certainly a greater sense of adventure as we trespass in fresh territory, whether that's to clean out an enemy encampment or simply out of curiosity, uncertain if we're equipped to deal with what awaits.

In no time, we're facing off against strange and unpredictable yokai, trying to remaster the art of the burst counter (or, rather, burst break – it's a slightly simplified variant), and gathering all kinds of loot – a system that could still do with streamlining – for both character types. Encounters are often unexpected and, yes, fatal. On one occasion a conspicuous green rock reveals itself to be a giant worm-like monster, which inhales us with Dyson-like ferocity into its maw. If we've got our appetite back, we're not alone.



MARVEL TOKON: FIGHTING SOULS

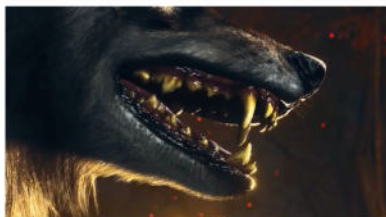
Developer Arc System Works **Publisher** SIE **Format** PC, PS5 **Release** 2026

That Sony ended its June State Of Play presentation with Arc System Works' surprise reveal is testament both to the confidence it has in the title and the paucity of available alternatives. That latter point shouldn't reflect badly on Arc, however, which is clearly stamping its identity on yet another outing for Marvel's over-exposed heroes.

An extended presentation was right to zoom in on Arc's character designs for the title, and how Marvel itself wanted the studio's interpretation of Captain America and co. The result oozes Arc's *Guilty Gear* anime style, with chunky frames and ultra-expressive animation: Iron Man could almost be a

mech; Ms Marvel's limbs stretch and morph with cartoonish fluidity. The impacts of their super-strength moves land hard, in some cases launching an opponent into a different part of the stage, before battle continues.

Because this is a 4v4 tag-team fighter, there's extra dynamism and the screen is busy during switches and team attacks. Still, to ease the burden of learning a quartet of characters before you can compete, it's also possible to stick with one lead, bringing teammates in purely for assists. It all sounds very exciting – as long as Arc can balance its ambitions and an explosive cast with its countless potential members.



GHOST OF YOTEI

Developer/publisher SIE
(Sucker Punch Productions) **Format** PS5 **Release** October 2

Sony decided to keep its powder bone dry in its Summer Game Fest State Of Play as far as Sucker Punch's historically set sequel was concerned. A surprisingly brief trailer revealed very little, largely serving to tease a more in-depth preview to come in July. In terms of what is shown in the trailer, protagonist Atsu is likewise in a holding pattern, scrutinising an enemy settlement from a hilltop campfire. A twist arrives in the form of a lupine companion – the grey wolf, following Atsu, steps from the shadows and bares its teeth, apparently eager to join the fray. It suggests your feral acquaintance will play an important combat role, but we'll need to wait to see exactly what that entails and how else it may aid Atsu in her quest for revenge.



SWORD OF THE SEA

Developer/publisher Giant Squid
Format PC, PS5 **Release** August 19

After kicking things off with underwater adventure *Abzû*, Giant Squid has emerged as a talented design team that seems to want to make thrilling, movement-based games with names that are annoyingly hard to remember. Following on from 2021's *The Pathless*, in which you fired arrows to maintain speed and took down a range of giant creatures, here's *Sword Of The Sea*, which channels the world of board sports. The flow state is once again the target, and the hero's Hoversword, a means of transport as well as a weapon, has qualities borrowed from skate- and snowboards, but also surfing. With the sands rippling beneath you and Austin Wintory providing the soundtrack, this is another appointment with indie royalty – if you can remember what it's called.



SEA OF REMNANTS

Developer/publisher Netease Games (Joker Studio)
Format PC, PS5 **Release** 2026

Conspicuously absent from Sony's summer State Of Play were any fruits of its investment in service games. It was left to NetEase, then, to ensure the form wasn't unrepresented, although even there it wasn't obvious what was on offer. Featuring a crew of animated pirate mannequins, with ship battles punctuating land-based bouts of stealth and action, *Sea Of Remnants* could easily be mistaken for a traditional open-world RPG. And even after we learn the game will be free to play, any longterm ambitions remain unstated. Instead, we're drawn to promises of a living world and meaningful player choice: how you interact with the game's 300 characters should produce ripples of consequence and stories unique to each player. Live service or not, it's an adventurous proposition.

XBOX

The park has dangers you'd never encounter in the back yard – but there's also a mountain of ice cream out there somewhere



GROUNDING 2

Developer Obsidian Entertainment, Eidos Montreal **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** July 29 (Early Access)

How do you go about creating a bigger, better sequel when smallness is a vital part of a game's appeal? The developers of *Grounded 2* have taken an admirably simple approach. The first game followed a group of children who had been shrunk and lost in a back yard, a place where grass suddenly towered overhead and usually harmless insects became apex predators. For the followup, the kids are back and they've been shrunk once again, but this time they've been dropped into a new, wider space.

Brookhollow Community Park is roughly three times the size of the map in the first *Grounded*. But this sequel is not just about bigger numbers. The park has recently been evacuated following an explosion, and is in a state of disarray by the time you arrive. As a result of this, it's full of interesting biomes. An ice-cream cart, knocked on its side, has become a snow level, complete with its own spin on Antarctic cosmic horrors in the form of ice scorpions. Elsewhere, an anthill built upon toxic waste is effectively a FromSoftware swamp, overrun with cockroaches. Environmental storytelling is all around. Picnic benches are covered in graffiti and the entire space is littered with discarded toys and pieces of machinery.

Since this fresh stomping ground is home to new, more dangerous enemies, the combat options have been expanded. Game director Chris Parker says that there's a kind of rock, paper, scissors strategy at play, revolving around light attacks, heavy attacks and blocking. On top of that, there's now a dash move for creating space or closing gaps. All these abilities are shared with most of the enemies, and should lead to more tactical battles. The RPG aspects are also becoming more dense, with passive and active mutations, plus an archetype system that will hopefully allow for unique approaches to character builds. All this intersects with armour and weapons systems.

Finally, a longtime fan request is being granted with the arrival of mounts, known as buggies. Obsidian has revealed that the ability to ride insects will connect with all the game's systems, from combat and traversal to resource gathering and even crafting. Each buggy will also have its own personality, apparently.

Given all this, it makes sense that the development team is getting larger too, as Obsidian partners with Eidos Montreal. If that is an interesting prospect, though, it's not without its dangers. The original *Grounded* was both a passion project and a surprise hit. The second will have higher expectations to contend with.



MISTFALL HUNTER

Developer/publisher Belling Games Format PC, Xbox Series Release 2025

Our grip tightens on the controller as we encounter our first human opponent in a ruined crypt. Wielding our greathammer, we close the distance with an enhanced dash. But before we can exchange further blows, we're interrupted by a wall of flames entering from the left of the screen, summoned by a tall monster dressed like a priestess. We take advantage of this distraction to press the attack, dispatching both our adversaries with a flurry of hammer strikes. All that's left to do is loot the corpses and continue onwards, searching for the Soul Of Return which will allow us to leave safely – the Gyldenmist is closing in, after all, and this area will soon be unsafe.

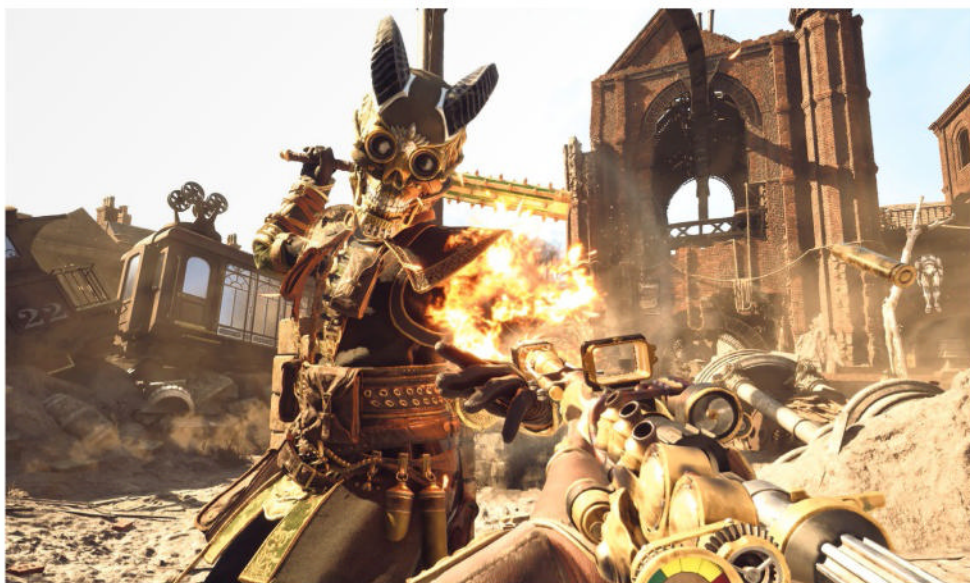
Just as we piece our build together from the spoils of fallen foes, Belling Games' foray into the extraction space resembles a melange of influences. The aforementioned Gyldenmist functions like the shrinking circles of battle royales, for example, while its Norse-mythology-inspired setting feels indebted to recent entries in the *God Of War* series. "We want our world to feel a little bit wild and mysterious," game director **Hao Zhang** tells us.

Opting for the melee-focused mercenary class, we soon fall into a rhythm pairing basic attacks with special abilities available on cooldowns (it is particularly satisfying, we find, to chain a meaty

shield bash into a spinning sword strike). While success in combat feels in no small part dictated by your own dexterity, we're shown a variety of permanent upgrades available following successful missions, such as increasing weapon damage or gaining stacks of resistance upon pulling off certain moves. Alarm bells sounding, we broach the subject of balance with Zhang: it's easy to imagine ourselves running into a comically over-levelled opponent deep into a run, a prospect made more concerning given that loot is lost upon death.

Our concerns are partly addressed by the promise of level-based matchmaking in the final release, while Zhang stresses that all characters are equally tuned at higher levels, something that should be particularly important when playing as a trio. Here, each of the five available classes falls into familiar archetypes: our mercenary operates as a tank, for example, while seers provide ranged support for allies. Such teamwork should prove vital when tackling the larger enemies dotted around the environment: we barely catch a glimpse of the first boss we encounter before we're smashed into the ground by an enormous axe, fated for the halls of Valhalla. At least death provides us a chance to experiment with equipping different skills, even if our time slot is set to expire. Round two will have to wait.

We barely catch a glimpse of the first boss we encounter before we're smashed into the ground



CLOCKWORK REVOLUTION

Developer/publisher Xbox Game Studios (inXile Entertainment) **Format** PC, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

The filth trickles down in the pristine city of Avalon, ending up in the slums where you're trying to make a living – rarely an honest one. *Wasteland* developer inXile serves up a world here that seems to run like *Dishonored's* Dunwall by way of Guy Ritchie, as various criminal geezers make sure we know they mean business by swearing a lot. Take the three characters unveiled early in the trailer: local mobster the Shark, a talking puppet introduced as 'the pissed-off doll', and a snooty lord simply nicknamed 'the Knob' (yes, with a K). They're a mixture of the self-entitled, psychopathic and plain angry. The odds of meeting anyone pleasant seem long.

Yourself included? You are, after all, a criminal in this firstperson action RPG, trying to ply your trade on the fringes of society without getting on the bad sides of the city's worst villains – although as the game seems to begin with you burgling the Knob's palatial home, that may not be easy. You won't merely be stealing portable valuables, though, with a range of customisable firearms available for self-defence or wanton violence. And then there's your power to control time using a device prised from the grip of the powers that be. With that, your journey takes the title's rebellious turn. Maybe some good can arise in Avalon, after all.



KEEPER

Developer/publisher Xbox Game Studios (Double Fine Productions)
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** October 17

Squint and this tale of an anthropomorphic lighthouse that sets out on a dangerous adventure could be the work of ACE Team. There's a little of *Zeno Clash's* queasy Gaudi-inspired art, and a suggestion that even the simplest of shapes might contain a disconcerting skeleton.

In truth, though, *Keeper* signals the return of *Psychonauts* studio Double Fine, back with a story of friendship and exploration, as the titular lighthouse and a strange seabird set off to escape the spread of withering tendrils. Puzzles will follow, as well as a fair amount of platforming, and the whole thing is delivered without dialogue. It's oddball stuff – and that's quietly heartening, as this is just the kind of game you might have worried Double Fine would never be allowed to make again once it became a part of the Microsoft machine.



ANIIMO

Developer Pawprint Studio **Publisher** Kingsglory Games
Format Android, iOS, PC, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

With one eye on *Pokémon* and another on *PalWorld*, *Aniimo* is described as a "free-to-play next-gen creature-catching open-world ARPG". As that suggests, this is the more corporate kind of fantasy, and *Aniimo's* very lushness invokes a sense of professional market research as much as whimsy and imagination. Creatures scale from crabs and clamshells all the way up to what appear to be giant vegetable bosses that erupt from the ground. Each critter captured unlocks new abilities and often a new way of moving through the landscape, and there's certainly a sense of playfulness and life to the game's varied designs.

It's all very slickly done, but creature collectors rely above all else on a genuine sense of character and coherence to keep players interested, and we've yet to see if *Aniimo* can deliver on those fronts.



RESIDENT EVIL REQUIEM

Developer/publisher Capcom Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Release February 27

Even from our seat near the middle of the YouTube Theater, we can see Geoff Keighley's devilish grin clearly as the Summer Game Fest host teases an announcement for *Resident Evil*... only for Capcom's Jun Takeuchi to tell us to expect further announcements in the near future. If the wind has been taken out of attendees' sails, though, it's replenished during the show's finale, as Keighley channels his inner Columbo to remind us about one last announcement. We meet FBI

analyst Grace Ashcroft, assigned to investigate the outbreak of an unidentified disease at a derelict hotel, the same location where her mother was murdered almost a decade previously. As the camera zooms in on a broken gate bearing an uncanny resemblance to that of the Raccoon City Police Department, the cat is out of the bag.

The roar that fills the venue, located next to SoFi Stadium, would make Taylor Swift blush. A few days later, packed into a small theatre,



Grace Ashcroft appears more fragile than previous *Resident Evil* protagonists – although the series has repeatedly shown just how deceptive appearances can be

we continue right where the trailer left off as Ashcroft awakens in a cold sweat. Bound and suspended upside-down, with a tube in her arm slowly draining her vital fluids, our protagonist MacGyvers her way out by smashing one of the blood receptacles and cutting her restraints on the broken glass. Our viewpoint swapping to firstperson, we join Ashcroft as she navigates what appears to be an abandoned hospital. A storm rages outside as she traverses dark hallways which bring *PT* to mind, drawing ragged breaths and whimpering softly. In one sequence that owes a lot to Kubrick, we glimpse what appears to be a monster at the end of a corridor, only for the image to coalesce into an unsettling sculpture of a horse mid-gallop. Nerves suitably frayed, we watch anxiously as Ashcroft searches for the various

MacGuffins needed to open a locked gate, illuminating dark storage rooms with a flickering lighter.

When Ashcroft discovers a decomposing body and confidently asserts that the subject is deceased, laughter ripples around the theatre. It's not the most subtly telegraphed jumpscare. Nonetheless, the room emits a collective gasp as an enormous hand slowly inches onto the screen. A grotesque, witch-like figure rips the corpse's head off before shambling after Ashcroft, grabbing our heroine and biting into her shoulder. As the showcase ends with the reveal of an optional thirdperson mode, a message promises that this is "merely the overture to our darkest symphony". A bold claim, yet on the strength of this showcase, one which Capcom may well be poised to deliver upon.



INFINITESIMALS

Developer Cubit Studios **Publisher** Epic Games Publishing **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

When you're only a few millimetres tall, even an ant can represent a threat. At least, that's the excuse we give ourselves after shooting the first living creature we encounter on our journey, only to be gently reminded by director **James McWilliams** that *Infinitimals'* creatures are not, in fact, hostile towards us. We feel a pang of guilt: there's a hint of the insectoid to the design of the alien captain Awkney Relinrake, after all, from the antenna-like growths on his head to the booster pack strapped to his back like a carapace. We join Relinrake as he searches a mysterious planet for colonies founded by his species, having recently awoken from hibernation after travelling from his home planet. Rather than finding a welcoming party, we soon bump into aggressive robots à la *Horizon Zero Dawn*, wrestling with these adversaries while searching for survivors.

Relinrake's equipment gives him enhanced mobility, boosters flaring as we dash away from projectiles and soar into the air. This pairs nicely with snappy over-the-shoulder shooting mechanics, rewarding twitch reflexes with the satisfying sight of our robotic adversaries crumbling into a scrap heap. More intriguing, however, is the setting itself. "I always wanted to make something where you were small in nature," McWilliams says. "I always

liked insects and seeing [the world] from that scale." We draw comparisons to games such as *Grounded*, which revels in the novelty of blowing familiar objects such as baseballs up to enormous proportions, but McWilliams stresses that the studio was keen to avoid the vibe of films such as *Honey, I Shrunk The Kids*. We don't see any gargantuan children's toys, then, as we journey to a militaristic structure more in line with the *Far Cry* series than

The Borrowers, scanning the electromagnetic footprint of the base to track security cameras and sneak our way in.

Our stealth toolkit is limited, although McWilliams cites the *Deus Ex* series as an inspiration, promising that Relinrake will acquire more abilities as the campaign progresses. Not that he cares: our unflappable hero evokes a British Buzz Lightyear,

while a steady stream of gags brings the *Ratchet & Clank* series to mind (the first security pad we encounter is bypassed by guessing the combination 1-2-3-4). Other personal touches soon reveal themselves: Relinrake's battalion is named in honour of McWilliams' grandfather, for example, a World War II veteran who fought as a member of the RAF 175 Squadron. If we are to continue our journey through this world, though, we must remember to paraphrase words of wisdom from *Finding Nemo*: insects are friends, not foes.

"I always wanted to make something where you were small in nature. I always liked insects"



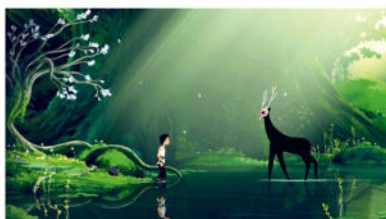
BOUNTY STAR

Developer Dinogod **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2025

When we think of mech games, the likes of *Into The Breach* and FromSoftware's *Armored Core* come to mind, titles which celebrate the destructive potential of these hulking iron exoskeletons. *Bounty Star* protagonist Clem, however, seems just as focused on building up as she is on tearing down.

We spend much of our time exploring the former soldier's outpost, which is nestled in a post-apocalyptic environment evoking the southwestern United States and more closely resembles a working farm than a combat centre. After kickstarting a jukebox, we check in on some baby dinosaurs Clem is raising before moving on to cooking and shopping.

"We love mecha stuff, but we realised that there's not a lot of stories that really zoom in on the pilot," creative director **Benjamin Ruiz** tells us. "That's where a lot of the other parts [of the game] came from: let's really expose her character." Not that Ruiz is scrimping on the action. Our mech might appear rusty, but it pilots smoothly as we take on bounties. We avoid landmines as we tear into opponents, using rockets, stasis shields and melee attacks to our advantage. Even here, we can deepen our bond with Clem. As silence falls, the veteran takes the time for journaling, ending our demo on an introspective note.



PLANET OF LANA II

Developer Wishfully Studios **Publisher** Thunderbolt Publishing **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

Wishfully Studios' delicate spin on alien invasion is getting a sequel that promises a longer narrative and a wider environmental range. Snow biomes and underwater sections have been added, along with more dynamic weather. There appears to be a refreshed focus on physics in the puzzles, to go with the great number of enemies that have been modelled on spiders. The blend of puzzling, stealth and gentle beauty looks to remain intact, and there's still a lot of goodwill generated by the protagonist's cat-like companion. Elsewhere, new traversal options, including walljumping and sliding, should add zip to the action sequences. The melancholic 2D platformer has been a surprisingly busy genre over the past few years, but another trip to Lana is still a welcome prospect.



TIRE BOY

Developer Corey Martin, Andy Chmilenko, Thomas Tobin, Ian Wang, Adam Myhill, Gerald Orban **Publisher** GameTeam6 **Format** PC **Release** TBA

Tire Boy is the sort of game people describe as 'charming'. There's something sweet and childlike about this open-worlder's battles against ducks and frogs, all of which are enlivened by a hit-pause right out of *Zelda*. But look at *Tire Boy* himself and there's something thrillingly off about it all. As the name suggests, he is a boy who is also a tyre, arms and legs emerging from the inside. It's enough to make you wonder what's going on in there.

What's going on outside is easier to assess, at least, as this is an open-world action adventure that seems to take the bucolic expanses of Link's recent escapades and throw in all manner of indie quirks. The idea appears simple, then, but the execution seems reasonably expansive.



DOSA DIVAS

Developer Outerloop Games **Publisher** Outerloop Games, Outersloth **Format** PC + TBA **Release** 2026

Following on the heels of *Thirsty Suitsors*, *Dosa Divas* is a 'spicy RPG' from Outerloop Games, featuring turn-based battles, recipes and reconciliation. The turn-based battles promise to foreground unusual attacks and sharp character design, but the star of the show so far comes in the form of a spirit-mech that rattles around the world with the main protagonists, preparing and executing a range of meals.

The mission promises a mix of satire and pathos as you take on a rotten fast-food empire and try to reconnect communities to their traditions through grub. The culinary approach goes deep, too, with each character you take into battle taking their class-based powers from one of the five flavour profiles. Umami is sure to be OP.



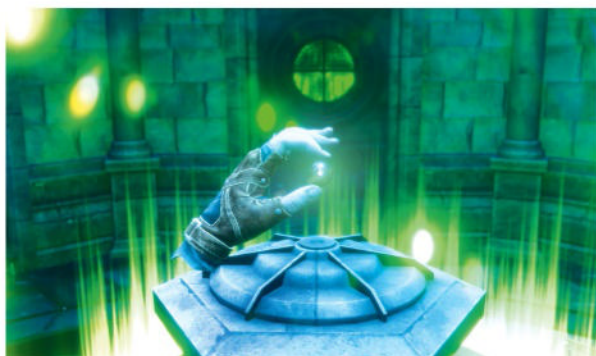
TOWA AND THE GUARDIANS OF THE SACRED TREE

Developer Brownies Inc **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Format** PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** September 19

It's been satisfying to see the effect *Hades* has had on the industry at large, inspiring a wave of fast-paced, narratively driven action Roguelikes. But where that series drew upon the mythology of Greece, *Towa* looks towards Japan's heritage. We're prompted to choose between eight guardians, selecting the fish-headed Nishiki as our primary fighter and mage Rekka as support. Amid lush pastures, we rip into servants of the evil god Magatsu. Basic attacks drain our sword's durability, but switching stances repairs it. We find our rhythm by launching spinning overhead slashes before shifting to sweeping strikes, maintaining our weapon's integrity while pulling off satisfying

manoeuvres. Not that Rekka is a slouch: our ally can turn the tide of encounters by summoning fireballs and shields.

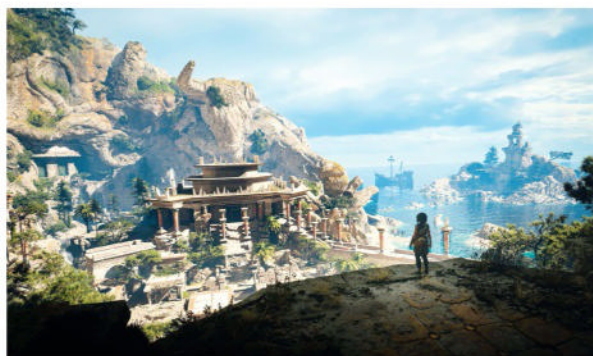
Icons hang over branching paths following encounters, allowing us to browse event types to improve our passive bonuses and gain resources. We fail to improve our gear (and our reflexes) enough to defeat a dragon in the second area we explore, a surreal landscape contrasting bright red grass with bone-white trees. Just as in Supergiant Games' modern classic, however, death is merely a stopgap in Towa's journey. Resources collected can be used to upgrade our home base, while selecting different characters will affect their dialogue.



THIEF VR: LEGACY OF SHADOW

Developer Maze Theory **Publisher** Vertigo Games
Format PC VR, PSVR2 **Release** 2025

Games such as *Budget Cuts* and *Half-Life: Alyx* have made the most of VR's ability to create heart-pounding stealth experiences, so it's little surprise to see *Thief* getting the headset treatment for both PSVR2 and PCVR. *Legacy Of Shadow's* reveal managed to walk the line between everything players expect of a *Thief* game – gadgets, arrows, gadget-arrows – and everything modern VR excels at. It should be particularly thrilling to get close enough to a passing guard to be able to pluck a key from their belt. Aiding everything is a focus on tactile environments and graspable objects that should ground you in this distinctive milieu. *Thief*, like VR, is a beloved thing that has never really had its mainstream moment. That's unlikely to happen as a consequence of this game, but these things coming together should result in a rich harmony.



RESONANCE: A PLAGUE TALE LEGACY

Developer Asobo Studio **Publisher** Focus Entertainment
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

The ending of *A Plague Tale: Requiem* suggested there was more to come, although our money would have been on a modern spinoff rather than another medieval adventure, which is what we're actually getting. Set just 15 years before the original duology, you play as Sophia, a treasure hunter on the run who stumbles upon the ancient Minotaur Island – a place that promises deadly trails and trials, puzzles and combat with your pursuers, with the mythical monster also making its presence felt. Sophia is far more athletic by default than the noble-born Amicia, so we can expect more close-up encounters and agile platform hopping, probably reducing reliance on stealth. With no sign of any rats, though, it's not clear how any of this links to the established fiction, and if Sophia remains a lone operator it could be a very different tale indeed.



SNAP & GRAB

Developer No Goblin Publisher Annapurna Interactive Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Release 2026

To make it as a career criminal, you need a style that suits your skillset. Agent 47 gets up close and personal with his targets, for instance, while the likes of Garrett and Corvo tend to get their hands dirty when engaging in thievery. Not so for Nifty Nevada. In the guise of a high-society photographer, our fabulously monikered mastermind uses her camera to snap reference images for her henchman Brick, leaving the scene long before he swoops in to execute a heist.

We join Nevada as she attends a rooftop party thrown by the self-obsessed artist Erik Pop. Warhol-esque prints of Pop hang on the wall as we walk past pink flamingos, only to find water fountains modelled in the artist's likeness. Every detail of this vibrant world is a love letter to the '80s, from Nevada's impressive shoulder pads to the oddly catchy Euro disco pounding through the speakers. Ostensibly hired by Pop to document the event, we have our eyes on a different prize: the crystal skull displayed beside a swimming pool.

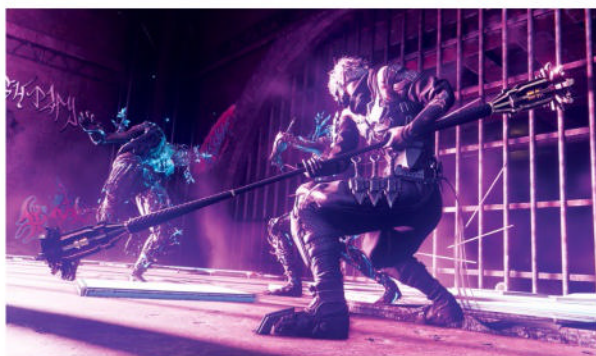
After taking pictures of the loot and the security guard standing nearby, we enter the menu to access our planning board. Here, Nevada can pin photographs together in a linear sequence, paired with simple instructions for Brick such as 'grab' or 'follow'. Trial-and-error is encouraged,

with the option to simulate our heist at any time, which turns out to be vital for gathering clues. After taking a picture of a partygoer dancing dangerously close to the edge of the pool, we watch Brick shove the poor sap into the water, his actions playing out in a montage set to infectiously upbeat synthpop. However, Brick's cover gets blown by a tiger cub in a nearby enclosure: we'll need to find a workaround. This involves searching

our surroundings in depth, *Hitman* springing to mind as we navigate dense crowds and don disguises to access restricted areas.

Working out what photographs count as permissible puzzle pieces can be frustrating, however, evoking the fussiness of old-school adventure games. One section asks us to make a chef's apron messy by spilling food, so we take a picture of condiment bottles. Yet our suggestion is a non-starter, with hot dogs considered the only permissible solution. Still, despite these frustrations, there's undeniable satisfaction in finally threading the needle and pulling off the perfect robbery, and promotional images suggest that future levels will be far less prescriptive, allowing Nevada to issue instructions to several members of her crew simultaneously. We're also looking forward to games of cat-and-mouse between Nevada and her plucky detective adversary, Rio Rivers.

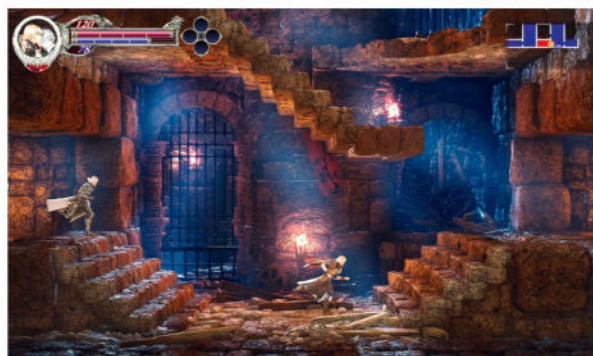
There's undeniable satisfaction in finally threading the needle and pulling off the perfect robbery



NINJA GAIDEN 4

Developer Team Ninja, PlatinumGames **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** October 21

The star turn in *Ninja Gaiden 4*'s latest trailer is performed by a weapon: among other new toys, protagonist Yakumo produces a spear with a giant, drill-like spinning tip. Suffice it to say, once it's embedded in one of the game's fiends, it leaves quite a mess. Team Ninja and PlatinumGames seem keen to accentuate the series' blood-soaked past, with katana decapitations and body-shattering hammer pounds also making the sizzle reel. Yakumo, like previous lead Ryu (who also features), is relentlessly aggressive and anything but squeamish. His Bloodraven technique, in fact, feeds off the red stuff for killer charged strikes. With no shortage of action games incoming, there's still something about the ferocity of the *Ninja Gaiden* series that remains largely unparalleled. That this entry also invites Platinum to do what it does best leaves us thirsting for blood.



BLOODSTAINED: THE SCARLET ENGAGEMENT

Developer ArtPlay **Publisher** 505 Games
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

Just as ArtPlay's first full-blooded Metroidvania managed to capture the essence of *Symphony Of The Night*, this prequel looks set to follow the trajectory of Konami's series after that milestone, adding new twists in the hope of rebottling the lightning. To wit: the game's dual protagonists, Leonard and Alexander, knights of contrasting origin, are now both under your control at once. Or rather, you can switch between them at will, with your second joining in when you trigger teamup attacks and techniques, as if they're always there in your shadow. Our early impression is that this makes for a more combat-centred affair, but we're also promised a larger map and day/night cycles. Aside from the constant character barks accompanying flashy moves, it's a reimagining we're happy to sink our teeth into.



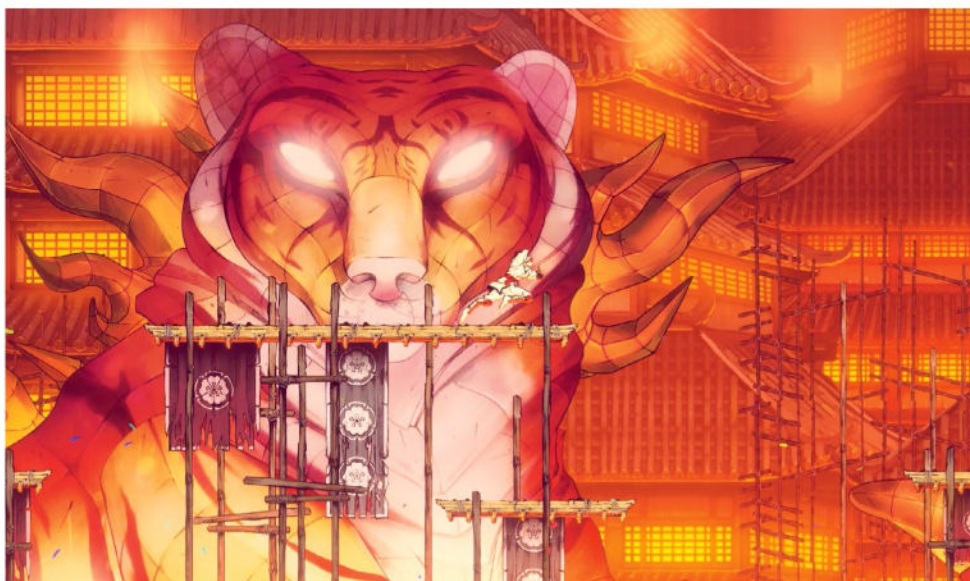
SPINE

Developer/publisher Nekki **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2025

It's odd that we haven't yet seen a full-throated action game spinoff for the *John Wick* series, with *John Wick Hex* leaning into tactics rather than attempting to recreate the moment-to-moment action of Chad Stahelski's choreography. Nekki's beat-'em-up might not be an official tie-in, but the influence of Keanu Reeves' series looms large over our time journeying through a cyberpunk city as Redline, a graffiti artist searching for her kidnapped brother. The titular Spine, implanted into her back, turns Redline into a one-woman army, springing into action to a soundtrack of pulsating techno. The *Arkham*-inspired combat system allows us to flow around arenas to dole out

punishment, dodging incoming strikes foretold by flashing indicators before counter-attacking with flurries of gun-fu.

For game director **Dmitry Pimenov**, the aim was to blend close-quarters gunplay with striking camera work. "We want to find the balance between being cinematic and usable," he says. One eye-catching sequence pays homage to the top-down *Dragon's Breath* sequence from *John Wick 4*, letting Redline loose with a shotgun. We're curious about how much depth lies beneath the surface, although the ability to deploy aerosol cans as smoke bombs hints at the presence of tactical wrinkles. More recreations of Wick moments feel guaranteed, at least.



SHINOBI: ART OF VENGEANCE

Developer Lizardcube, Sega **Publisher** Sega **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** August 29

With *Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound* beating it to launch by a matter of weeks, Sega's ninja-themed platformer will face stiff competition this summer. We are quickly won over, however, within seconds of picking up *Art Of Vengeance*, enchanted by the expressive, cel-shaded art style which has become a calling card for *Streets Of Rage 4* dev Lizardcube.

It's not only the look that clicks; the feel does too. We start by chaining strikes into simple combos, as Joe Musashi dusts off his white shinobi shozoku and fights to protect his village from ne'er-do-wells, but satisfying layers of complexity are soon added. Stunning foes leaves them open to stylish

executions, time temporarily freezing as Musashi darts around the screen to deliver killing blows, while basic attacks charge up ninpo abilities such as fire breath. Our arsenal is further augmented with ranged kunai, used to break the posture of larger enemies, while executions reward us with red orbs used to charge Ninjutsu Stance, a screenwide firestorm activated by slamming both triggers. Our reflexes are also tested as we traverse our environment, requiring us to smoothly chain mid-air dashes with precision platforming. The makings of a worthy successor to *The Revenge Of Shinobi* and *Shinobi III* are in place, in other words. Let the battle of ninjas commence.



ACTS OF BLOOD

Developer/publisher Eksil Team
Format PC **Release** TBA

When we start to play Eksil Team's bruising brawler, we wonder if its presence on Summer Game Fest's Opening Night Live might have raised expectations too high. What looked as slick as *Sifu* in the trailer is clearly a lower-budget effort in the hands. Still, that's not necessarily a problem – the B-movie feel of this vigilante revenge drama may become part of its appeal.

In combat, an *Arkham* influence is detectable in generous counterattack cues, prompting you to wait for goons to try their luck, then punish them for it. The spirit of *Sifu*, meanwhile, emerges in props you can kick at enemies, and plenty of nasty weapons – including guns – are on hand to give your knuckles a rest. The sense of impact isn't quite there yet, however, and a chainsaw-wielding boss seems strangely unsure how to use his weapon.



ROMEO IS A DEAD MAN

Developer/publisher Grasshopper Manufacture
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

Grasshopper may have been quiet in terms of new IP in recent years, but the moment this trailer came on screen, we couldn't fail to identify its provenance. If *Romeo* is a very typical Grasshopper game, though, that makes it very atypical next to the other action games revealed at SGF. Nobody else does it quite like this. An animated intro takes us from a family dinner to hero Romeo Stargazer's imminent death in under 30 seconds, an event only halted by a device that bores into his skull. It's dizzyingly weird, funny and brutal. Now, Romeo is stuck between life and death as a space/time-travelling FBI agent, and the rest of the trailer shows us what he's capable of with fist, sword and gun (slaughtering monsters amid fountains of blood) while giving us flashing glimpses of 8bit-styled minigames along the way. Yes, this is Grasshopper all right.



ONIMUSHA: WAY OF THE SWORD

Developer/publisher Capcom Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Release 2026

Appearing during a showcase dominated by remakes and sequels, *Onimusha* initially feels like an odd choice for resurrection on Capcom's part – it's been almost 20 years since the series' last mainline console release, after all. Our misgivings are soon quashed, however, as we're whisked away to Edo-era Kyoto, joining samurai Miyamoto Musashi as he navigates a village beset by illness. Red lightning crackles through a storm cloud threatening on the horizon, foreshadowing an encounter with creatures prowling in a nearby forest.

Several stealth kills later, and we're thrust into action, swarmed by humanoid demons and unsettling floating heads capable of latching onto Musashi and exploding if not dealt with promptly. At first, combat hews closely to the formula established by *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* as Musashi unleashes flurries of sword strikes to break the postures of his adversaries and launch powerful attacks. These moves serve as finishers on weaker opponents, sending limbs flying through the air like a twisted reimagining of *Fruit Ninja*, but breaking the posture of more formidable foes presents you with a dilemma: do you target a vital spot or aim for a weaker area highlighted by a purple icon? Opting for the latter deals less damage but scatters piles of coloured orbs, which can be absorbed

into the Oni gauntlet clasped onto Musashi's right arm, charging certain abilities.

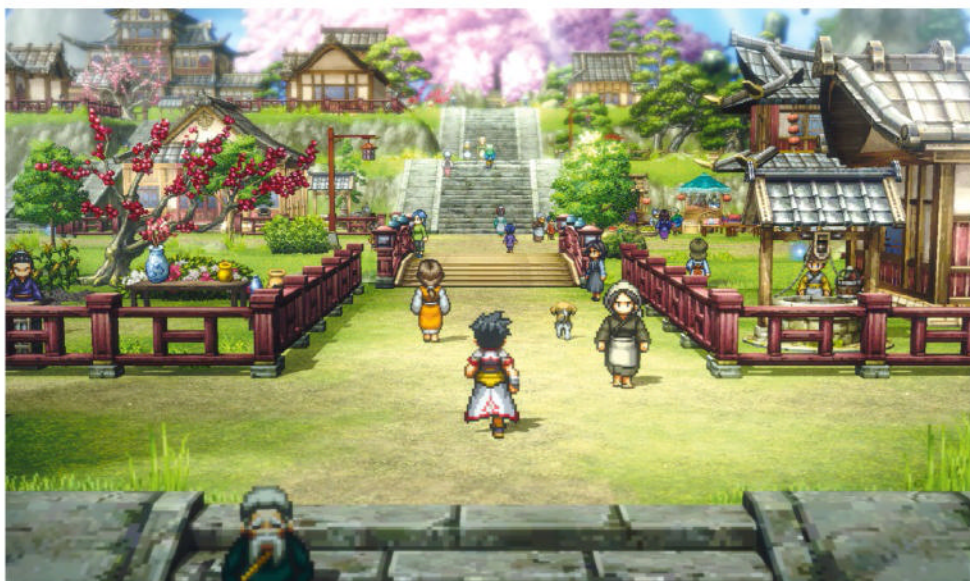
We watch the samurai summon a pair of spectral daggers and whirl around the battlefield, leeching healing energy from any enemies he strikes. Encounters flow smoothly: well-timed dodges are rewarded with vicious counter strikes, which can be chained against the rank and file to clear out arenas in seconds. Musashi is preternaturally

skilled with his katana, parrying attacks and projectiles coming from any direction, and utilises the environment as a weapon, whether by shoving foes into braziers or using a mat as an improvised shield. The gauntlet also serves as one half of a buddy-cop duo, its disembodied voice reprimanding the samurai for flippantly referring to it as "gauntlet lady". It's not all sunshine and

slaughter, however: its capacity to corrupt becomes evident upon encountering Ganryu, a flamboyant adversary driven mad by his own gauntlet.

Elsewhere, Musashi is prompted to absorb dark energy to summon ghostlike-images from the past: we witness a horrifying scenario where bound villagers are tossed, screaming, from the edge of a temple. As our hero walks outside, the sky shatters like glass and a wolfish demon emerges from a red chrysalis, aggressively pursuing Musashi with a two-handed axe. It's a stylish end to a stylish demo.

These moves
send limbs flying
through the air
like a twisted
reimagining of
Fruit Ninja



SUIKODEN: STAR LEAP

Developer Konami, Mythril **Publisher** Konami **Format** Android, iOS, PC **Release** TBA

After the series' PS1 beginnings received a neat HD remaster in March, the groundwork was laid for a fresh addition to the veteran RPG's ranks. That *Star Leap* looks like an evolution of those originals, rather than their less storied successors, only sweetens the deal. We feel the monkey's paw curl, however, at the news that this is a free-to-play mobile game, albeit with a PC release, too. The probability that it will be riddled with microtransactions and gacha mechanics is too great to ignore, especially given what we've seen from Konami in the past.

And yet its reveal trailer makes a lot of the right noises, as well as showing off its upgraded 2D/3D visuals. The turn-based

battle system seems to retain the speed and simplicity that suited the breezy flow of the original adventures. The army-versus-army tactical skirmishes are still in place. Locations from the first game feature, tidily spruced up. The stirring soundtrack returns. And the story appears stacked with all the treachery and divided loyalties you might expect. Most importantly, there will once again be 108 characters, or stars, to recruit to your cause, with an all-new lineup promised, reigniting the powerful completionist draw the series always engendered. Fingers crossed they aren't released at the whim of a virtual vending machine.



STRANGER THAN HEAVEN

Developer/publisher Sega (Ryu Ga Gotaku Studio)
Format TBA **Release** TBA

Formerly known as Project Century, *Stranger Than Heaven* has an intoxicating pitch: the sprawling RPG approach of the *Like A Dragon* games, but set in the first half of the 20th century, with a noir aesthetic and a smoky, sax-heavy soundtrack. From the glimpses we've had so far, the game will hop through time a little, with the setting apparently ranging from the mid-teens to 1943. The brawling looks as thrilling and improvisational as ever, and it's going to be fascinating to follow the characters – and the location, a thinly fictionalised section of Osaka – through several fraught decades of history. Most of all, the latest trailer suggests a genuine harmony between the developer's biggest series and this new setting. If any studio were made to develop a game set in the era of sharp-suited gangsters and underground jazz bars, it's this one.



RELOOTED

Developer/publisher Nyamakop
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

The best heists are personal, and that seems to be the case with *Relooted*, in which a group of thieves use parkour and wit to forcibly repatriate African artefacts from the various museums around the world in which they are now displayed. There's a winning spark of fury at the centre of the premise, and it's only helped by the fact that the game's hectic robberies all involve genuine pieces of stolen African art.

From this bright core foundation, developer Nyamakop promises to build a game of speed, tactics and precision. But there's also a lot of research and planning involved, as players case joints, learn the environments and then put their schemes into operation. *Relooted* is shaping up to be a tactical adventure with a sharp intent and a footloose implementation.

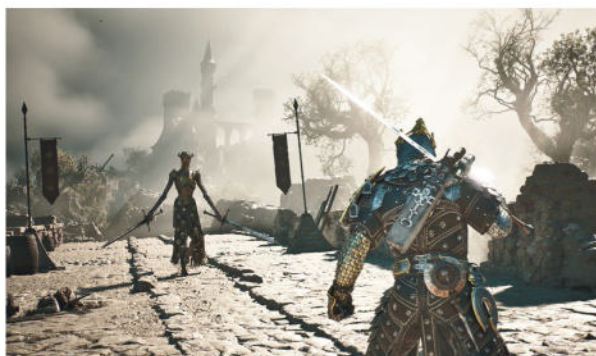


MINA THE HOLLOWER

Developer/publisher Yacht Club Games Format PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series Release October 31

A lot of faux-8bit titles have passed under the bridge since Yacht Club released *Shovel Knight* a decade ago, and *Mina The Hollower* finds itself coming ashore amid a wider familiarity with its developers' aesthetic aims. Yet as we get stuck into the demo, there are immediate signs that it can still make its mark. A thoroughly old-school attract sequence kicks us off, with sliding stills of its characters up close – not least the mousy Mina – striking dramatic poses. From there we begin our journey, washing up from a wrecked ship into top-down *Zelda* territory, where brute beasts and craftily constructed puzzles await.

As for the *Hollower* part of the equation, it amounts to an ability to burrow and travel under the earth in short bursts or to tunnel down into various grottoes. Hold the jump button and you plunge downwards – a way to avoid obstacles, pick up boulders (by emerging beneath them), and safely get behind enemies. That said, it's not the easiest skill to control, with a slightly sensitive, twitchy feel to movement in the soil. It seems that here, too, Yacht Club is sticking to old-school principles, a sensibility that spreads to some of the visuals, which are a little too blocky to distinguish. Perhaps that's the price we have to pay for such commitment to retro stylings.



MORTAL SHELL II

Developer Cold Symmetry Publisher Playstack
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Release 2026

A title reveal that caught us off guard, since little in the trailer bears much resemblance to the first game. For one thing, *Mortal Shell* never felt quite as confident as this heavy-metal-laden teaser, in which a Soulslike protagonist commits acts of context-sensitive violence on a range of grotesque fiends. The first game was a slower, less dynamic affair, lacking the graphical chops to pull off the kind of visual flair visible here in both animation and creature design.

If *Mortal Shell* was a fairly middling *Souls* wannabe, though, its one shining feature was the shell system that enabled you to harden into a rock-like state in a trice to deflect blows or even alter the timing of your strikes. That ability is strangely absent from the sequel's reveal, leaving us hoping Cold Symmetry hasn't sacrificed what made it unique to achieve this evident upgrade.



GAME OF THRONES: WAR FOR WESTEROS

Developer/publisher Playside
Format PC Release 2026

George RR Martin's fantasy universe turns to strategy and tactics in the shape of this RTS, which flings you into the Seven Kingdoms to fight for supremacy, whatever the cost. The scheming houses should provide a valuable anchor point in what can be an unforgiving genre, and in addition to single- and multiplayer modes, you'll be able to restage *Game Of Thrones*' most famous battles. All of this is welcome, and early glimpses suggest that scale should not be a problem, with stacked armies fighting in a range of environments while dragons swoop in to disrupt the rock-paper-scissors unit matchups. Even so, the greatest moments of the books and TV show often turn on personal failings and local politicking, so it will be interesting to see if the campaign can capture the viciousness and bloodshed that takes place away from the battlefield.



MORBID METAL

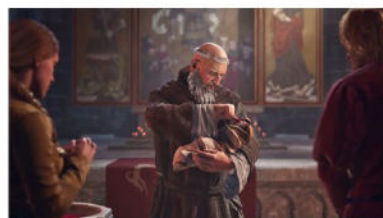
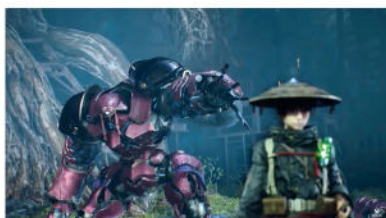
Developer Screen Juice **Publisher** Ubisoft **Format** PC **Release** August 20

Are we finally seeing the influence of *Returnal* starting to pervade in the Roguelike space? *Morbid Metal* takes the same approach of combining a traditionally authored genre with the format, in this case swapping thirdperson shooter for thirdperson character action.

In a simulated reality mixing cyberpunk with Edo-era Japan, we take on the role of a kind of robo-ronin, all swishy swords, air combos and perfect dodges, carving our way through a range of metallic foes. That is, at least, until we're given the opportunity to swap for a heavy-hitting alternative, armed with a much larger weapon. In time, you'll be able to

switch between three characters instantly, effectively selecting a squad that can overcome a range of challenges for each run.

At the moment, while the action has all the right ingredients, it isn't as smooth as *Returnal*'s, with optimisation required if it's going to provide the conditions for the expert timing it demands. The framing of your adventures also seems less sophisticated: like a machismo-infused version of *The Talos Principle*, you're an AI tasked with becoming humanity's great hope, in this case by proving your prowess in combat. Whether that leads to any philosophical musings remains to be seen, but if not, the bot-on-bot violence could sustain us by itself.



BEAST OF REINCARNATION

Developer Game Freak **Publisher** Fictions
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

A lone samurai and her companion dog face off against rusting mechs and chunky yokai in this action RPG from a developer that's still best known for pocket monsters. It's possible to detect a little of that previous experience in the design of the enemies, in fact, which have a touch more charm and personality than most of the beasts that games send your way to be sliced into pieces. Indeed, it's going to be a shame to cut some of these characters down.

The combat itself seems to be fairly technical, and appears to be intimately linked to magical traversal across pretty and bucolic fantasy environments. As the blend of mechs and yokai suggests, this is a vision of a ruined future that draws upon a range of influences.

TENET OF THE SPARK

Developer/publisher Roar Games
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** Late 2026

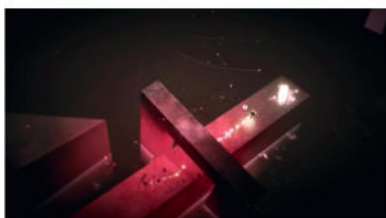
There's a touch of *Sifu* to *Tenet Of The Spark*, and that goes deeper than the angular, sketched-in characters and brisk hyperviolence. There's a conceit that threatens to take a narrative brawling game and turn into something that genuinely makes your head hurt. In this case, it's that you play as three characters in three different time periods: in addition to the modern-day hero, you control an Aztec warrior and a Viking. Each has different strengths and weaknesses and you can swap between them at will, with each character's world relating in meaningful ways to the state of the others. This would be enough to think about in a puzzle game – and there will be puzzles here – but to swap eras and still maintain a sense of connection in combat? Intriguing and ambitious stuff.

THE BLOOD OF DAWNWALKER

Developer Rebel Wolves **Publisher** Bandai Namco
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

Timing is everything here. This action RPG, set in Carpathia in the 1300s, plays out over 30 days and nights as the protagonist, Coen, a man cursed with encroaching vampirism, tries to save his family from bloodsuckers. The ticking clock gives a sense of urgency to story missions, each of which shunts the narrative forward. Elsewhere, a 'limited time' quest system adds a little diary management to the general hacking and slashing, and if you fumble an objective you could lose out on a reward for good.

The Blood Of Dawnwalker is the first game – and first planned chapter in a saga – from Rebel Wolves, a team made up of CD Projekt Red veterans, which explains the earthiness of the setting and bodes well for the fact that the game unfolds in an open world, albeit a fairly small one.

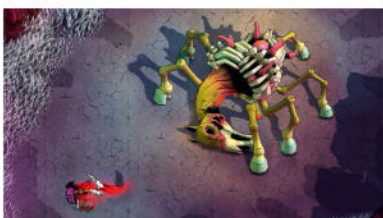


LIGHT ODYSSEY

Developer Ssun Games **Publisher** Gravity
Format PC **Release** 2025

Few words bring as much anticipatory joy when you place them next to each other as 'boss' and 'rush'. *Light Odyssey* does just that – this is a boss-rush action game in which your tiny hero must take on a gauntlet of increasingly large and terrifying monsters to fight their way across a moody near-monochrome landscape.

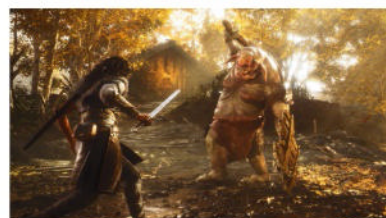
It looks exhilarating, with a camera that hovers high overhead to make you feel particularly small and vulnerable, and enemies whose abstract blockiness gives way to brutal cudgels and maces and antlers. The ground shakes and shatters under the impact of heavy blows and the whole game seems to be coated with a veneer of charcoal and grit. The focus is thrillingly obvious: bosses, combat, and that's all. It could well be enough.



BLIGHTED

Developer/publisher Drinkbox Studios
Format PC + TBA **Release** 2026

DrinkBox Studios, the purveyor of beautiful, luridly coloured action games whose difficulty balancing is sometimes slightly off, returns with a surreal action-RPG Western about revenge, the team's love of purples and oranges on full display. The story hinges on a deadly, reality-altering blight that infects the game's world, and the blend of puzzling and action feels like it has lots of potential. You'll conjure invisible bridges, lay down brutal area-of-effect attacks and tackle gigantic bosses, all of whom are likely to stop your forward momentum for a day or two. Fortunately, in addition to highly technical combat, DrinkBox games offer rich worlds whose origins lie well outside the standard influences of most action games and RPGs. *Blighted* might hurt, then, but it should be worth it.



ECHOES OF THE END

Developer Myrkur Games **Publisher** Deep Silver
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** Summer

Myrkur Games' debut is set in the kind of fantasy world that lends itself to vast RPGs. It's a surprise, then, when this turns out to be an action adventure – and, it seems, a fairly entertaining one at that. The combat is sharp, while the ability to mix magic in with the swordplay looks like it should lead to some satisfying combos. The scale of the world, which is all vast canyons and echoing caves (and influenced by Myrkur's native Iceland), promises to provide plenty of space to battle in. Puzzles and traversal challenges should round things out, and while the art is slightly generic, the lighting in particular does a lot to create a sense of dormant beauty. Given the success of *Eternal Strands*, there's room for this kind of broad fantasy if the combat and magic has enough bite.



CODE VEIN II

Developer/publisher Bandai Namco **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

Soulslikes get plenty of love at Summer Game Fest, with *Wuchang: Fallen Feathers* and *Lies Of P's* expansion securing premium slots in the main showcase. The loudest cheers, however, are reserved for the announcement of a sequel to *Code Vein*, Bandai Namco's anime-tinged take on the FromSoftware formula. Our stylish protagonist explores a ruined city alongside a mysterious woman known as Lou, a dilapidated structure resembling the Eiffel Tower crumbling on the horizon as we explore. Using a bayonet, our hero stabs a foe in the back before charging up a triple shot, purple smoke flashing from the muzzle. The pace of the ensuing encounter

brings the *Devil May Cry* series to mind as an attack segues a dash into an aerial slam, before pouncing upon enemies temporarily bound in place by Lou. Thanks to our status as a Revenant Hunter, a human/vampire hybrid, our character can absorb blood to charge abilities, at one stage summoning enormous golden claws to use as weapons. Time travel will feature as a plot device, with the ability to make changes in one timeline potentially unlocking locations in another, although our attention is caught by a new transportation option. No offence, FromSoftware, but who needs Torrent to get around when you have a motorcycle on hand?



CRIMSON DESERT

Developer/publisher Pearl Abyss **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** Q4

We feel as though we haven't been thrown in at the deep end so much as flung into the middle of the ocean. Desperately scanning the cheat sheet in front of us, we attempt one of the most complex manoeuvres we've ever pulled off in an action game: lifting a wooden beam. Doing so requires us to click both thumbsticks to enter Force Mode (the screen darkening around our protagonist, Kliff) before tapping two face buttons simultaneously to initiate the lift, green energy pooling around the enormous object. Afterwards, we button mash to lift it slowly, before carefully aiming the camera at a narrow opening to plant the beam. We'd be lying if we claimed we pulled it off on our first attempt.

This is merely the appetiser to an hour wrestling with Pearl Abyss' ambitious title, navigating a medieval landscape reminiscent of *The Witcher 3*. Giants and orcs camp alongside humans as we explore the besieged castle we're tasked with defending, scouting enemy outposts dotted around a landscape dominated by lush forests. Upon encountering enemies, we begin our next session of input jiu-jitsu, jumping before launching ourselves upwards on beams of green energy. We juggle trigger taps to gain altitude, re-enter Force Mode and slam back to earth with the force of a meteorite.

Giants and orcs camp alongside humans as we explore the besieged castle we're defending

Not that any respite waits for us down here: we're thrust into the middle of battle, dozens of soldiers duking it out as cannon fire rains down around us. The scene is startling, an audiovisual onslaught of which we are the focal point. We string together some basic attacks, but more complex manoeuvres require further finger contortion. We charge up a powerful elemental slam by holding down the right bumper and trigger simultaneously, the screen growing black as blue electricity crackles around us. Tapping two face buttons triggers a grab, a move which can be modified using a directional input to toss enemies. Even changing weapons requires a degree of finesse, requiring you to tap the left trigger while blocking.

We barely scratch the surface of these systems, let alone explore grappling and gliding, before we stumble into our first boss fight, which sees us pitted against a hulking red warrior. With a chance to slow down and focus on a single target, we unpack layers of complexity less apparent amid the chaos of open-field skirmishes, timing blocks and dodges to close the distance and stun our foe before clubbing him over the head with a collapsed pillar. With cooking, crafting and fishing among the other systems teased by Pearl Abyss, you have to hope that the studio's eyes aren't too big for its stomach.

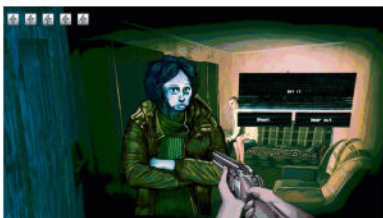
MULTIFORMAT+PC



PERSONA 4 REVIVAL

Developer P-Studio **Publisher** Sega, Atlus
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Its existence was leaked by voice actors, but it's still a thrill to see *Persona 4 Remival* for ourselves, albeit via the shortest of teasers, which mainly captures the small-town atmosphere with an undercurrent of psychedelic weirdness. As a remake, *Revival* applies new graphical polish to the original core of life sim, friendship and dungeon crawling, plus the return of many fans' favourite cast.



NO, I'M NOT A HUMAN

Developer Trioskz **Publisher** Critical Reflex
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** Q3

The world is ending and strange visitors have started turning up at people's houses and knocking on the doors. In this self-styled 'anxiety horror', your job is to study the strangers outside your house and dispatch any who don't seem quite right. There's a touch of *Rescue On Fractalus* to this unsettling exploration of paranoia and prejudice. The creepy art only heightens the impact.



MINISTRY OF ORDER

Developer/publisher Voltekplay
Format PC **Release** TBA

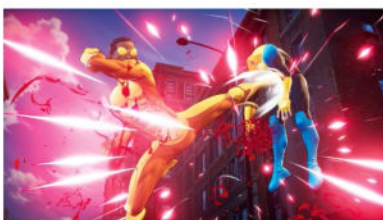
The elevator pitch is *Papers, Please*, but with babies. It's the 1920s, and deep within a totalitarian regime your job is to match the newborns in a maternity wing to their correct parents, solving logic puzzles involving everything from blood types to eye colours. Inevitably, a wider narrative soon unfolds that will lead to tricky moral dilemmas. A quietly unnerving prospect.



DON'T WAKE THE BEAST

Developer/publisher Artificial Disasters
Format PC **Release** TBA

At a glance, this is a fairly orthodox Roguelike, in which you hunt for loot within a suite of fantasy dungeons that are scrambled every time you enter. As the title suggests, though, the aim is to go unnoticed, using a grappling hook to move blocks around or to zip up into the air, thereby avoiding detection. As each treasure weighs you down, though, you can't help but make more noise...



INVINCIBLE VS

Developer Quarter Up **Publisher** Skybound Games
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

This 3v3 fighting game set in the Invincible superhero universe evokes a fond sense of nostalgia – it's the kind of thing that might have made a release slate back in the PS2 days. Supers and Ultimates should lend a sharp tactical edge to the tagging in and out of fighters, and developer Quarter Up has a decent pedigree, its core members having worked on 2013's *Killer Instinct*.



INTO THE UNWELL

Developer She Was Such A Good Horse
Publisher Coffee Stain Publishing **Format** PC **Release** TBA

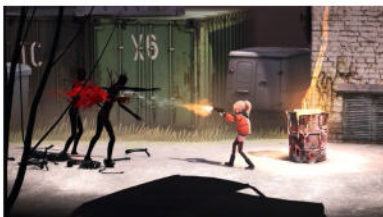
Even before you've paid for a beer with a freshly plucked tooth, the kazoo-heavy soundtrack tells you something's avry. *Into The Unwell* is intriguing: a Roguelike brawler with a rubber-hose cartoon art style and a central theme that appears to hinge on animal alcoholics. The unusual aesthetic and narrative choices seem clipped to a game that plays the genre stuff fairly straight, however.



VOID MARTYRS

Developer/publisher Mac N Cheese Games
Format PC **Release** TBA

Not *another* game about a nun in a spacesuit. *Void Martyrs* is a survival horror set in a universe in which the church was the first organisation to reach the Moon. Your job is to embark on a crusade and root through abandoned installations and space cathedrals in search of holy relics. With touchstones that include *Darkwood* and *Signalis*, this should be horrible in all of the best ways.



SILLY POLLY BEAST

Developer Anji **publisher** Top Hat Studios
Format PC **Release** 2025

A story-driven thirdperson shooter with a visceral art style, this sets you loose in hellish, twisting environments, armed with a range of hefty ballistic weapons and what appears to be a Stanley knife. The camera pans around complex structures revealing a sculptural approach to levels, and there's a skateboarding palate cleanser. Any game that uses silhouettes this well is one to keep an eye on.



STRANGE ANTIQUITIES

Developer Bad Viking **Publisher** Iceberg Interactive
Format PC **Release** TBA

Strange Horticulture's strain of melancholic plant sudoku remains memorable among modern puzzle games, so it's a delight to ponder the prospect of this not-quite sequel. *Antiquities* sees you managing another odd little shop and working out the intricacies of your stock. The first game featured a mid-campaign gimmick that still lingers in the mind; it will be interesting to see if this can match it.



MARVEL COSMIC INVASION

Developer Tribute Games **Publisher** Dotemu, Gamiror Games **Format** PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** 2025

The crowded hall in which we spend much of our time during SGF isn't exactly ideally suited to showcasing certain types of games – it can be a challenge to isolate yourself from your surroundings when using a VR headset, for instance, with so much going on all around. But such an environment feels oddly ideal for Dotemu's latest beat-'em-up, lending a party atmosphere to our session. While we smash our way through levels alongside another attendee, each player resembles their own two-person tag team. Alternating between your chosen characters on the fly enables you to set up effective attack strings with relative ease. We use Captain America to knock

adversaries into the air before hot-swapping to Spider-Man mid-combo, the friendly neighbourhood superhero swinging in from screen left to mete out additional punishment. Our handiwork is made easier to appreciate by the vibrant pixel art you'd expect from Tribute, as well as stylised animations used to bring characters such as Venom to life. While mostly adhering to genre standards, levels are augmented with flourishes such as punch-operated Gatling guns and pits into which we can knock enemies for instant kills. Mild tactical considerations are even required for tougher enemies, forcing us to time hits and navigate space to neutralise shields.



BAKUDO

Developer Sayil Games **Publisher** Shueisha Games
Format PC **Release** TBA

Cel shading and halftone? *Bakudo's* developer is doing its best to win people over on aesthetics alone. And there's a lot to be intrigued by here. The game revolves around the futuristic sport of the title, which is best described as tennis sans rackets and with an open-door policy on murder. Knock the ball back and forth and hope to eventually smack your enemy with it. There's a great sense of zip to the movements, while cartoony onomatopoeia only heightens the sense of fun.

But this is only half of what *Bakudo* is offering, as the game will also explore a Bakudo academy housing the standard dark secrets that such places are meant to contain. "Colourful characters" are also promised. Hopefully they'll be sporting a bit of nifty-looking halftone too.



FELT THAT: BOXING

Developer Sans Strings Studio **Publisher** TBA
Format PC **Release** TBA

Off-brand Muppet boxing is a weirdly brilliant idea, taking the fearsome blows and ridiculous personalities of the sport and throwing in a range of knockabout sad-sack characters who have been tailored specifically to take punches in an amusing manner. *Felt That: Boxing* certainly made a big impression at Summer Game Fest, where its strain of silliness and heart was in short supply elsewhere.

Graphically, it's quietly wonderful, its computer visuals already being mistaken for stop-motion or even FMV. And for all its goofy characters, there's a pummeling sense of impact to its matches and minigames. On paper, little is more dangerous to attempt than comedy fighting games or grown-up puppet humour. In trying to combine both, *Felt That: Boxing* might reveal a weird strain of genius.



EVERYBODY'S GOLF HOT SHOTS

Developer Hyde **Publisher** Bandai Namco
Format PC, PS5, Switch **Release** September 5

The most cheerful of golf games returns with its largest roster of players yet. The core three-click system remains in place to determine your drives and putts, but a day/night cycle and new weather conditions promise some interesting wrinkles.

In addition to a singleplayer campaign and various co-op and multiplayer options, a new mode named Wacky Golf attempts to mix things up, knocking balls off course with tornados or blocking the hole with the arrival of something that looks distinctly like the Monolith from 2001: A Space Odyssey. It's a welcome attempt to bring fresh ideas to a sport that lends itself to videogames better than to incremental design tweaks. We'd happily see some backtracking, in fact, from the PS4 game's microtransactions and grind.



Living up to its name, *Reach* gives you a pretty decent workout as you stretch to grab, fling and swing your way through the environments, adding to the sense of immersion

REACH

Developer/publisher nDreams (nDreams Studio Elevation) Format PCVR, PSVR2 Release 2025

Virtual reality took something of a back seat at Summer Game Fest, with *Thief VR: Legacy Of Shadow* and *Deadpool VR* the sole headset-dependent games receiving screen time during the main showcase. But if the industry at large is still hesitant to continue experimenting with the medium, the same can't be said for nDreams. The UK-based specialist studio has been honing its craft for over a decade, creating titles such as the PSVR2-exclusive

Synapse, and it's a pedigree that becomes immediately apparent when you look into the lenses of a headset in order to play *Reach*.

We weave through urban obstacle courses using gestural traversal mechanics. Climbing requires us to reach up, grip onto a surface by holding down the trigger, and then fling our arm downwards, riding the momentum upwards before grabbing onto another ledge like an acrobatic ice climber. We shimmy across a beam by passing one hand



over the other, before physically swinging our elbow across our torso to leap across a gap. We soon find ourselves chaining moves together smoothly, leading us to a clear runway. Gathering momentum, we swing our controllers forward to leap into the air, holding our breath as we fall back to earth. The shooting-gallery sequence that follows allows us to catch our breath as we methodically dispatch foes using our bow and pistols. It's no surprise, then, that producer **Callum Godfrey** cites action-adventure titles such as *Uncharted* as an inspiration.

"For us, the best part of VR as a medium is immersion, the presence we can give you in the world," he says. "*Half-Life: Alyx* is a benchmark for quality [in VR] – we want to take that and push it further." That's quite the comparison, yet we find a champion for it in former Sony

exec **Shuhei Yoshida**, who has worked with nDreams since the studio's involvement in the early days of PSVR. Yoshida acknowledges that the market for VR has not grown as quickly as expected when Sony launched its first headset. However, his outlook is enthusiastic. "VR is still new and there are so many ways to innovate," he says. "Developers like nDreams are at the forefront."

If you haven't played many VR games before, though, this particularly ambitious example might make you feel unsteady. One sequence involving the floor exploding beneath you has the potential to be particularly stomach-churning. Godfrey acknowledges this, telling us the studio has focused on incorporating natural gestures into the action, as well as working slower-paced sections into the campaign.



GRAVE SEASONS

Developer Perfect Garbage Publisher Blumhouse Games Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Release 2026

To, we have a feeling we're not in Stardew Valley any more. You could be forgiven for dismissing *Grave Seasons* as another clone of Eric Barone's juggernaut, from its pixelated aesthetic to the village full of potential love matches vying for your attention. Yet we don't recall our first action in that game being quite as sinister as breaking into a basement using a crowbar.

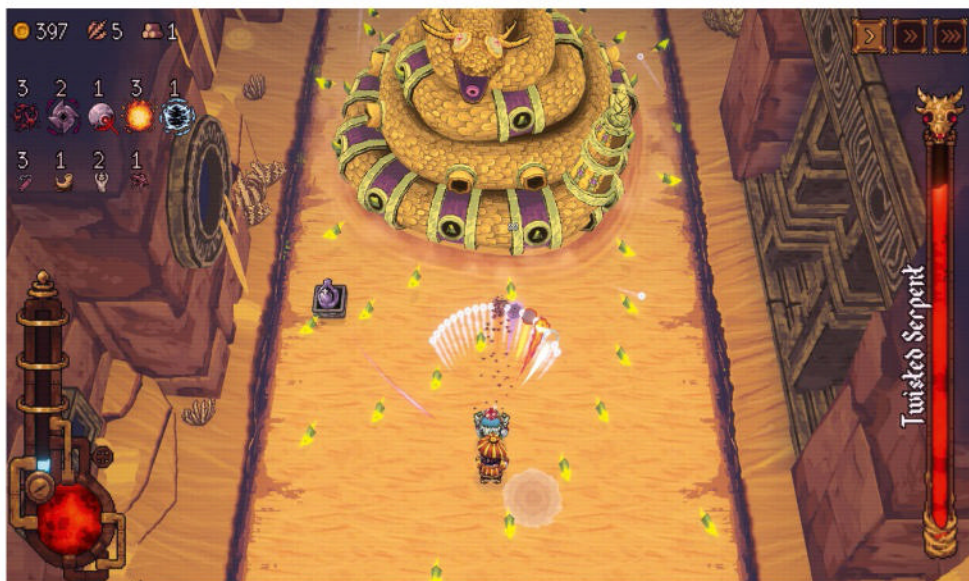
This change of pace is partly down to our protagonist: rather than an office worker who has inherited a plot of land, we play as an escaped convict who forces his way into a dilapidated farmhouse in the town of Ashenridge. The alchemy table and unusual machine we find inside hint at stranger occurrences to come, but our first day is spent in true farming simulator fashion: planting seeds, harvesting crops, picking up rubbish, and getting to know the locals. We're given a whistlestop tour of the neighbourhood by someone called Hari and form fast friends with Pilar, a local tailor with purple eyes and a distinctly witchy vibe. Our idyllic surroundings set green fields near a rushing waterfall, while the charming town evokes touristic coastal retreats, harbouring distractions such as a diner and flower shop.

We make some unsettling discoveries as we wander, however, such as a bloodied ring lying on

the ground close to our house. As well as showering our neighbours with gifts, we can question them about odd happenings around town in a similar manner to detective games, and soon find out that the ring belonged to the farmer who used to live in our property. This mystery soon fades to the back of our mind, though, as we're sucked into the pleasingly repetitive rhythms of farmwork. After a hearty meal consisting solely of fries (which uncannily mirrors our own diet between demos during this visit to LA), we meet up with Pilar to explore a forest, only to get blindsided by one of the most surprising moments we experience during our time at Summer Game Fest.

An enormous, wolf-like monster emerges from the forest, grabbing Pilar and dragging her away. We follow a trail of gore and viscera to discover her body lying on the ground as shredded skin dangles from a nearby tree. We search the scene, finding a book about witching plants that Pilar had borrowed from the local library. We dart back to our homestead to ask Hari what he knows, only for our demo to cut us off. There's always something gnawing about a mystery unsolved, and with that *Grave Seasons* makes a compelling case for us to resume our investigation as soon as the pieces are all in place.

Rather than an office worker who has inherited a plot of land, we play as an escaped convict



BALL X PIT

Developer Kenny Sun **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Format** PC, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** 2025

That Devolver Digital mothballed its usual anarchic summer presentation in favour of a deep dive into a single title felt like a curious move, yet we can't argue that *Ball X Pit* doesn't deserve attention. Boiling it down, we could call this *Vampire Survivors* meets *Arkanoid*: a wall breaker where the wall is an advancing horde of undead neatly arranged inside square and rectangular trays, and frequent level-ups bolster your firepower. Then again, that doesn't account for the base building between runs, in which you place crops, forests and administrative buildings, then 'harvest' resources by firing off villagers who bounce off the structures and around the fields.

It's unclear yet how integral those intervals will become to the evolution of your characters over time, but the action is already a blast. Attack options include status effects that, say, freeze enemies for a moment, as well as living critters that launch smaller balls on impact, and you can even fuse effects together to make room for more. It's also a crucial point that your balls ricochet around until you run into them and that buffs might make them speed up with each bounce or grant bonus damage if you hit enemies on a particular side. As the relentless skeleton army begins to overwhelm your position, it's well worth thinking about the facets of your build.



DEATHGROUND

Developer/publisher Jaw Drop Games
Format PC **Release** Q3 (Early Access)

On one hand, it's an easy sell: Jurassic Park as a multiplayer survival game, with raptors and T-Rexes on tap. Or, put another way, it's *Left 4 Dead* with razor-toothed lizards instead of zombies, with all the desperate flights for safety that implies. Now all Jaw Drop Games has to do is conjure up cinematic moments and backs-to-the-wall groupwork from the details of its design.

It feels right for starters that you aren't heavily armed, although some weapons are among the tools you can craft and carry (such as motion trackers and medkits). You'll need to sneak, hide and run to survive, which should ensure the dinos remain fearsome opposition. To boost tension, there will be procedurally generated elements, while enemy AI reacts based on sight, sound and movement. If *that's* sufficiently convincing, Jaw Drop may have a winner.



GECKO GODS

Developer Inresin **Publisher** Super Rare Originals
Format PC, PS5, Switch **Release** Q4

A small lizard may not be quite as versatile as Link when it comes to working through dungeons, but Inresin's gecko at least has the advantage of sticky feet. In the game's demo, we're left to explore what feels like a historical ruin on a quiet Aegean island, dipping into cool fountains and scampering up walls (and unlike Link, we're not constrained by stamina reserves). Less realistic yet equally welcome, meanwhile, is a dash move useful for knocking away predators, smashing jars or making lengthy leaps between rocks.

Soft colours make the environments easy on the eye, but it's the puzzle solving where the real promise of *Gecko Gods* seems to lie, as it makes the most of the reptile's ability to handle vertical surfaces and even traverse areas upside down in order to trigger switches and other pieces of abandoned machinery.



KING OF MEAT

Developer Glowmade **Publisher** Amazon Games **Format** PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** 2025

As we wait to enter the arena, a calming voice chimes out in the manner of a call centre assistant: "Thank you for your patience, your death is important to us." With a world boasting sentient buzzsaws, anthropomorphised owls and locations such as a Raveyard – kitted out with tomb-shaped jacuzzis – offbeat humour bleeds into every aspect of this party game. It's no surprise, perhaps, given the pedigree of Guildford-based creator Glowmade, which was founded by Lionhead veterans. Taking on its blend of obstacle courses and simplistic melee combat, we thus charge into battle like a true knight: kitted out in a traffic-cone helmet.

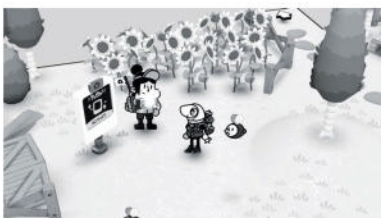
We fight as part of a team, facing off against skeletons and goblins, carefully timing when to activate special abilities such as an AOE freezing spell. In terms of coordinated play, though, there's little to consider beyond occasionally having to step on multiple pressure plates simultaneously. There's also scant variety in the challenge chambers we encounter – we find ourselves missing the Takeshi's Castle-style minigames that make *Fall Guys* so enjoyably chaotic. Perhaps we'll find inspiration building dungeons in Creative Mode. Yet the game's true test will lie in its online play, and how well it can tap into the inherent joy of bumbling around with friends.



LEGO VOYAGERS

Developer Light Brick Studio **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** 2025

Lego Builder's Journey was that rare Lego game in which the bricks were the star rather than the licence clipped onto them. *Voyagers*, from the same team, promises another trip through familiar territory. The twist takes the shape of co-op play, as two bricks tumble together through a range of dinky Lego dioramas on a mission to rescue an abandoned spaceship. Puzzles seem to have a welcome focus on both building contraptions and using the game's physics to fire yourself across gaps or swing from grapple points. There should be enough leeway to allow for expressiveness in terms of the solutions you cobble together to overcome each scenario. As ever, the fun of the bricks should make this open-ended design soar. And there's no chance of stepping on anything barefoot.



TOEM 2

Developer Something We Made **Publisher** Popaganda, Something We Made **Format** PC + TBA **Release** 2026

Back in 2021, *Toem* took players on an enchanted photo walk through a range of monochrome papercraft environments. This sequel looks set to tweak the formula in a handful of small but consequential ways. You're back travelling with your camera again, but the game's worlds are more dynamic, built with a range of 2D and 3D assets that fit together surprisingly well. Your moveset has expanded, allowing you to climb through the world with greater freedom, while a range of friends who are encountered throughout the course of the campaign all provide new tools for you to mess around with. Most heartening is the sense that the original game's focus – on noticing the world's details as much as exploring its environments – has survived intact.



ESCAPE ACADEMY 2: BACK 2 SCHOOL

Developer Coin Crew Games **Publisher** iam8bit Presents **Format** PC **Release** TBA

The original *Escape Academy* steadily became something of a monster hit, so a sequel was pretty much inevitable. *Back 2 School* offers more of the same escape-room puzzling, either in singleplayer or co-op, along with an interesting twist: the game is set within an open world, with all of its rooms placed across a single contiguous landscape.

You can expect plenty of codes and ball-bearing mazes and pipes to rotate along the course of the adventure, and as before there's a winning weight and tactility to the bright presentation. *Back 2 School* will be an escape-room game that emerges in the shadow of *Blue Prince*, however, and despite the quality of its predecessor, there's a danger that its stack of delights may seem a little too straightforward at this point.



MIXTAPE

Developer Beethoven & Dinosaur Publisher Annapurna Interactive Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Release 2025

Returning to LA this summer, we expected the usual things: the heat, the humidity, even the political climate. What we didn't factor in was the psychic damage we might sustain upon meeting Stacy Rockford. Memories of teenage angst come rolling back as we explore her bedroom in a suburban mountain town. Worn cassettes are stacked in a box labelled 'tapehead graveyard', while VHS recordings of MTV broadcasts sit next to a chunky CRT TV. Our heroine scoffs at pictures of her early teens, when this seasoned rocker used to *smile* for the camera, before filling in her friends Cassandra and Slater on her grand plan to fly to New York and train to become a music supervisor.

We join the trio as they plan their final night together, beginning with an important quest: acquire booze and attend a beach party. Each sequence begins with Stacy staring down the lens of the camera, announcing the soundtrack for the level like an alt-rock DJ. It's hard not to grin as we skateboard downhill to Devo, swerving to dodge traffic as Stacy claps along to the beat. This second release from Beethoven & Dinosaur is as much an ode to the needle drop as it is the '90s, built around a playlist featuring artists such as Jay Division, The Smashing Pumpkins and Roxy Music. This nostalgic vibe is paired with a stylised

aesthetic inspired by claymation, handsomely rendered in Unreal Engine 5.

"It's a raw and honest game about the teenage experience," technical director **Roman Maksymyschyn** tells us. "[You cling] to anything as an identity because you haven't really had the experience to know who you are yet." Our bond with this likeable cast is forged through a rapid-fire procession of minigames resembling a greatest-hits collection of childhood activities. We pull off a secret handshake by inputting a *Street Fighter*-style combo, headbang along to heavy metal, and even simulate Stacey's first kiss, the camera smash-cutting to an anatomical close-up of two tongues controlled by rotating the thumbsticks.

Realising so many different mechanics has been a challenge for the studio, but one not without benefits. "Each piece is fairly self-contained and modular, and that helps from a morale standpoint – you go into each vignette and you feel fresh," Maksymyschyn says. "We're doing our best to not compromise on quality or quantity." We leave our young protagonists in literal freefall, riding a shopping cart into a lake after getting drunk and running away from the police. While we can't empathise with this bit specifically, we're sure we'll have plenty more opportunities to wince at our past selves upon release.

Each sequence begins with Stacy staring down the lens of the camera, announcing the level's soundtrack



OUT OF WORDS

Developer Kong Orange, WiredFly, Morten Søndergaard Publisher Epic Games Publishing Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Release 2026

We haven't known **Johan Oettinger** for ten minutes, yet we're already entrusting the director with our life. As we explore a subterranean cave, our feet remain firmly on the ground while Oettinger's character walks on the roof, an ability granted to him by a magical being known as an Aleph. A steep rock formation blocks our path, forcing us to leap over it and plunge towards certain death. That is, until Oettinger sends the Aleph darting over to us with a quick button tap. Gravity instantly flips for both of us: while he crashes back down to earth, we fall *upwards*, using our momentum to whip around the pillar.

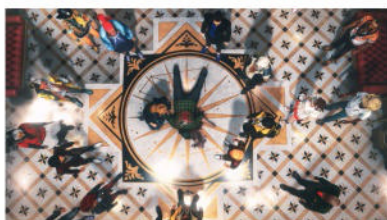
We position ourselves over a platform before shepherding Oettinger through the obstacle course, juggling the Aleph back and forth in a series of trust falls. Such silent communication is at the heart of this co-operative puzzle platformer, following protagonists Karla and Kurt after they crash-land in the fantastical realm of Vokabulantis and discover their mouths have disappeared. Not ideal timing, given that the lifelong friends were on the cusp of expressing their true feelings for each other.

"Their agenda is to find their mouths and say everything that they wanted to say in that split second when everything fell apart," writer **Morten Søndergaard** explains. Their emotions are easy to

read, however, thanks to stop-motion animation rivalling the quality of Laika's output. Indeed, every element of this world has been handcrafted using materials such as paper and clay. But while we associate this medium with slow, labour-intensive work, Oettinger assures us that the opposite was true for co-developers Kong Orange and WiredFly, the latter of which is a veteran of the artform. "Stop-motion is what I've done all my life, so it's very fast for us to make things," he tells us. "It brings me in emotionally. It's not just about the technique – it's about falling in love with the world, and it needs that special attention."

Such care is evident in the environments, from lush marshlands populated by enormous waterbirds to a bustling underground city of clay creatures, dotted with dioramas that remind us of Wes Anderson's back catalogue. A similar level of inventiveness has been applied to puzzles, including one sequence where we pilot the left arm of a golem to chase a servant of the totalitarian Mr Speaker, coordinating our movements with Oettinger. "It's not about points or competition," he says. "It's about helping [each other] and exploring the story together through these mechanics." Initially drawn by the aesthetic, we leave our demo convinced that we have discovered a legitimate challenger to Hazelight Studios' dominance in the cooperative space.

"Stop-motion is what I've done all my life, so it's very fast for us to make things"

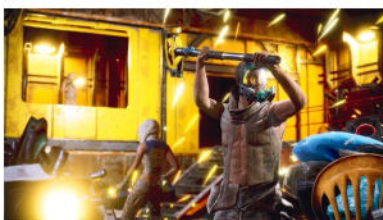


KILLER INN

Developer Square Enix, Tactic Studios **Publisher** Square Enix
Format PC **Release** TBA

If *Killer Inn* sounds like a *Traitors* knockoff, that's probably for the best. Twenty-four players gather in a spooky location and are secretly divided into wolves and lambs. A game of murder, deception and investigation unfolds, with the familiar setup given a distinctly videogame-flavoured twist: once the lambs work out who the wolves are, they get to fight them to the death.

With so many players in each match, things are likely to get very messy very quickly, and it will be fascinating to see how the design enforces some kind of order, while simultaneously remaining flexible enough for players to be able to surprise each other. The premise may be one step removed from a popular television game show, then, but it has huge cult-hit potential.

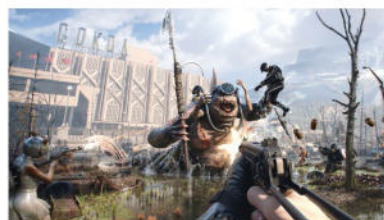


ENGINEFALL

Developer/publisher Red Rover Interactive
Format PC **Release** Q1 2026

Enginefall takes *Snowpiercer*'s class-based approach to train travel and uses it to create a 'social sandbox', where players work together, build, plot and fight and die and encounter a bit of everything in between. Your mission is to start at the tail end of an inconceivably large train and work your way forward until you've become the conductor. But what goes on along the way?

Building – both bases and alliances – appears to be the key to making sense of everything that can happen in *Enginefall*, and it's hard to work out whether a design this strange and ambitious is going to lead to a niche classic or a kind of ludic version of Reddit's strangest depths. Fortunately, the game is already in playtest mode, so answers should be forthcoming soon.



THE CUBE

Developer/publisher Mundfish
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Mundfish followed the announcement of *Atomic Heart 2* with a reveal for this ambitious MMO shooter, in which the action is set on a giant floating hexahedron with edges that rotate like a Rubik's Cube. Covered with shifting biomes, this world promises swift combat with an emphasis on fast-paced traversal of complex environments that often transform quickly. Cue much wallrunning. The whole thing exists within *Atomic Heart*'s densely imagined universe. The tone, meanwhile, feels like *Roadside Picnic* by way of a classic *Destiny* raid. It's beautiful to look at so far, but the online FPS remains a singularly unforgiving niche for a game to settle into. Can Mundfish's talent for developing intriguing scenarios and striking art give the game a firmer foothold?



EXOBORNE

Developer/publisher Sharkmob **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

It takes a moment to adjust to this apparent act of desperation: shouldn't we be running away from the storm, rather than into it? However, Sharkmob's extraction shooter demands you use its extreme weather events to your advantage. Lightning crackles around us as we deploy our parachute and ride an updraught, grappling up a cliff face to resume a firefight from higher ground. Our exosuit is kitted out with a number of swanky features, such as the ability to briefly turn invisible, but we have the most fun simply zipping around apocalyptic environments, coordinating with our three-person strike team as we complete missions. It's no surprise

that *Tribes* and *Quake* are among the series cited as inspiration by world director **Francois Roughol** and narrative director **Martin Hultberg**. "We want at least one of those FUBAR moments [per session] where you're like: holy shit, that's fucked up," Roughol says. We witness one such moment ourselves, as a tornado interacts with a flammable substance and catches fire. But just as you will have to adapt to chaos, so too is Sharkmob embracing its opportunity to apply lessons learned from its debut release, *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodhunt*, with an original idea. "We own the entire canvas," Hultberg says. "We can do whatever we want with it."

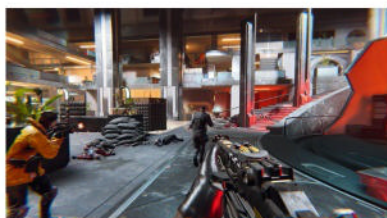


DYING LIGHT: THE BEAST

Developer/publisher Techland **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** August 22

A baseball bat is all well and good, but there's nothing quite as effective for dealing with zombies as a firearm. Techland has caved to fan demand for its latest entry in the *Dying Light* series, heavily incorporating gunplay alongside the hand-to-hand combat and parkour systems that defined the first two games. We make our way through a scenic town overrun by the walking dead before nightfall forces us to take shelter from the more intimidating enemies that emerge in the dark. The next day, we join protagonist Kyle Crane as he explores a warehouse used by the mysterious Baron to experiment on human subjects, injecting them with zombie DNA.

A former test subject himself, Crane possesses the ability to temporarily embrace his inner monster upon stringing together enough melee hits in quick succession. Our vision expands as Crane howls, using his bare hands to pulverise enemies. Further encounters revolve around charging this ability, and firing potshots at distant foes while swinging at nearby creatures. This rhythm proves essential to master upon encountering our first Chimera, an enormous enemy that charges after us in a scrapyard. Crane might be packing more heat than expected, but Techland hasn't forgotten its roots, as we end our fight with a melee execution worthy of *Mortal Kombat*.



DEN OF WOLVES

Developer/publisher 10 Chambers
Format PC **Release** TBA

More than 18 months since we took a first long look at 10 Chambers' fourplayer co-op shooter for E393's cover story, it seems to be shaping up well. To recap, *Payday*'s Ulf Andersson slings us into heist territory once again, looting and causing chaos in a stark cyberpunk city where the corporations run everything and industrial espionage is a way of life. Gadgets and gunfire take centre stage in a series of heist scenarios poised to go wrong and dump you into close-quarters firefights. The design team has a good history when it comes to developing this type of game, and the art style is suitably chic and dystopian; what remains to be seen is how the game balances planning, execution and managing the inevitability of disaster. As for the stakes: could this become a modern-day *Syndicate*?

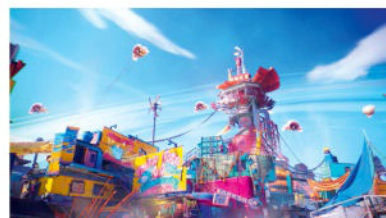


CHRONO ODYSSEY

Developer Chrono Studio **Publisher** Kakao Games
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2025

For all its talk of transcending the bounds of space and time, there's something pleasantly old-fashioned about this open-world MMORPG in which you party up with a group of friends and knock big numbers out of even bigger bosses. Party synergy is essential for survival, and the game also features puzzles that can only be solved by a group. A temporal gimmick, meanwhile, allows you to pause and rewind time during battles, and also explore the history of the game's fantasy world.

Pretty but fairly generic fantasy art and a name that invokes one of the true classics of the (non-MMO) RPG genre both muddle the prospects slightly, but the polish and sense of familiarity in what we've seen so far might see *Chrono Odyssey* through when it's released later this year.



TIDES OF TOMORROW

Developer Digixart **Publisher** THQ Nordic
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** February 24, 2026

From the Montpellier-based studio behind *Road 96* comes another narrative game about branching choices, this time with a multiplayer twist. Each singleplayer game takes place in the wake of another player, whose movements through the world you follow, dealing with any repercussions of their actions along the way. Away from the high concept, the game is set in a flooded world – as striking and colourful as that of Digixart's 2021 release – where a plasticising force is taking over. Your job is to travel around the planet, meeting people and learning more about what's really going on, most likely getting into scrapes based on who and what came before. It's a fascinating prospect and, following on from *Road 96*, perhaps this fresh experiment can conjure narrative magic.



DEADPOOL VR

Developer Twisted Pixel Games **Publisher** Oculus Studios **Format** Quest (3, 3S) **Release** Q4

It turns out that waking up and seeing your own headless body strapped to a surgical table is a deeply disorienting experience. Such is the insight that VR gives us into the world of ranty antihero Wade Wilson, who via multiverse-enabled plot contrivances finds himself sucked into a series of missions to take down various Marvel villains.

After reattaching our head, we carve our way through an airbase, dual-wielding swords and firearms. The gags come thick and fast, but the action is so engaging that it's hard to pay attention to Neil Patrick Harris' quips. Simple platforming sections and gentle puzzles break up the action, but much of

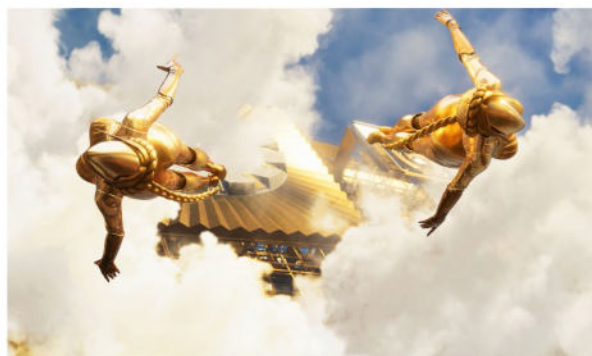
our time is spent dismembering enemies in cartoonishly violent fashion. Weapons can be thrown, while munitions from dispatched foes can be grabbed in mid-air à la *Superhot*, a satisfying touch that is no less effective here. Some opponents prove pesky, but we take a gung-ho approach nonetheless, chaining traversal methods to dash around arenas. "We're the kind of game that says 'yes' to the player," lead designer **Phil Therien** tells us. It's an ethos that extends to accessibility – a seated mode is supported for players with reduced mobility, for example. "We're making a statement: there are strong, narratively driven games that people can enjoy in VR."



007 FIRST LIGHT

Developer/publisher IO Interactive
Format PC, PS5, Switch 2, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

Putting *GoldenEye* aside, the ideal Bond for videogames is probably Roger Moore, whose air of ironic distance from the plot would have made him the perfect sardonic foil to the incompetent player behind the controller. But following Bond's sticky end in *No Time To Die*, we're now getting his beginning. *007 First Light*, from IO Interactive, will track a 26-year-old Bond on his journey to becoming a superspy. *First Light* promises to follow the singleplayer approach taken by games such as the *Arkham Asylum* series, blending everything – stealth, combat and some behind-the-wheel action in between – with upmarket locations and a customary supply of gadgets. IO feels like the right operative for this mission, given its history with poised, systems-heavy games. Perhaps Moore and his safari suit might even make an appearance via DLC skins.



ATOMIC HEART II

Developer/publisher Mundfish
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Mundfish knows how to build hype. If expectations for this sequel are slightly dampened after the first *Atomic Heart* fell short, this reveal pulls out all the stops to win us back. The visual design here is of a quality well above that in most of SGF's showings. Take the grandeur of its Soviet-futuristic brutalism, the robot-hand docking bay, or the spherical glass transformer mech pod – if Mundfish's art team ever branches out into premium gadget design, there would surely be plenty of takers.

The question is whether the studio can match this with its action and mission design, and it certainly seems to be having a go. There's a broader sense of scale and variety here, and if it's half as enjoyable as the sales pitch, backed by Queen's Don't Stop Me Now, we will indeed be having a good time.



AMBROSIA SKY

Developer/publisher Soft Rains **Format** PC **Release** TBA

Death and decay lie at the heart of many of the games we play during our time in LA. Indeed, *Mortal Shell II* kicked off the opening SGF showcase with an ode to hyperviolence, dismembering and disembowelling its demonic cast with gusto. Perhaps it's fitting that we end our stay by reflecting on our own mortality, as channelled through the lens of Dalia Volkova, a Scarab. Over two centuries from now, these researchers are charged with responding to deep-space disasters and retrieving organic samples from the deceased, performing their last rites in the process. It's a novel perspective, and one that Soft Rains studio head **Joel Burgess** tells us was inspired by end-of-life workers such as death doulas and crime-scene cleaners. "These jobs walk this interesting line between very intimate, tender care for somebody who's dead or dying, but also having to be extremely rigorous," he says. "The Scarabs, as an order, live in the equilibrium between those two tensions."

We join Dalia as she returns home for the first time in 15 years, responding to an unidentified calamity that has occurred on The Cluster, a farming colony nestled in the rings of Saturn. Using a device that sprays chemical fluid, we carve our way through thick layers of fungus that have taken over the outpost. It's easy to draw comparisons to

FuturLab's *Power Wash Simulator* as we blast away the organic material, but our playthrough more closely resembles the puzzle-driven exploration of games such as *Outer Wilds* than a cleaning rampage. Our surroundings fight back at every turn, as evidenced by the countless corpses littered around the space station, forcing us to use our tether and exploit the effects of zero gravity to explore every nook and cranny.

Our surroundings fight back at every turn, as evidenced by the corpses littered around the space station

Electrical currents run through blue fungi, short-circuiting any technology that comes into contact with them, while explosive projectiles are launched by more volatile varieties of mycelia. We progress by discovering and severing the fruits at the heart of these growths, used to research upgrades for our chemical blaster: retrieving enough blue fruits allows us to spray liquid foam which channels electricity once hardened, for example. Such tools are used to solve basic head-scratchers as we search for the remains of Gerald, a farmer Dalia remembers from her youth. We finally make our way to his apartment, discovering his skeletal remains in a chair, before performing a ritual known as bioremediation. Autumn leaves rain down from the sky as the soundtrack swells, a haunting voice sounding over soft intervals, and a spectral flower blooms in the spot where Gerald once lay, bringing the demo to a moving conclusion.

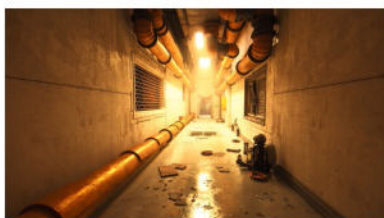


CALL OF THE ELDER GODS

Developer Out Of The Blue Games **Publisher** Kwavee
Format PC, PS5, Switch 2, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Lovecraft's adventures in the terrifying wilderness of the public domain continue with the quietly lavish *Call Of The Elder Gods*. Made by the team behind *Call Of The Sea*, this is another colourful and elegant puzzle adventure, and one that leads you from the creaking hallways of Miskatonic University to the Australian outback.

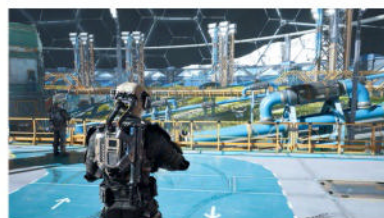
The developer's knack for creating tactile puzzle pieces remains undimmed, and the game's more complex brain teasers will involve switching between characters. Meanwhile, a final level of difficulty is provided by a suite of challenges stored in occult books. For all its unspeakable horrors, Lovecraft's oeuvre is so thoroughly known by now that it's become pleasantly familiar, and *Call Of The Elder Gods* looks as cosy as they come.



THE LAST CARETAKER

Developer/publisher Channel37
Format PC **Release** 2025 (Early Access)

Some of *The Last Caretaker*'s small team have come from the Finnish developer RedLynx, where they worked on the *Trials* series. This makes the sense of isolation and – fleeting – calm on display here all the more surprising. Cast as humanity's last hope, and a sentient machine to boot, you sail around the oceans of a lost world scavenging materials, crafting strange technology and nurturing what little human life remains. In terms of combat, it combines firstperson shooting with a tower-defence approach as you lay down automatic defences and launch countermeasures to protect yourself and a cargo of human 'seeds' from rogue bots and more. It all makes for an intriguing blend of mechanics and tone – so maybe that *Trials* DNA is showing through after all.



THE EXPANSE: OSIRIS REBORN

Developer/publisher Owlcat Games
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

This is a playable followup to the popular *Expanse* science-fiction novels and TV series. But dig a little deeper and it feels like a spiritual successor to BioWare's beloved *Mass Effect* series. Here is an action RPG set in the wilds of interplanetary space, where you begin your adventure by choosing one of three backgrounds and from a range of classes. Battles, meanwhile, allow you to switch to thirdperson and assign objectives to your squad.

As you'd expect, there is a little more from *The Expanse* itself in here, with various cast members returning to their roles (as we go to press, Owlcat has yet to name specific ones) and a story that aims to get the most out of the series' grounded approach. After the nuanced *WH40K: Rogue Trader*, Owlcat's eye for detail should suit fans.



VOID/BREAKER

Developer Stubby Games **Publisher** Playstack **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Like *Morbid Metal*, *Void/Breaker*'s a Roguelike with a hint of *Returnal* about it, albeit this time in the guise of an FPS. Even before we start shooting, there's a strong dystopian hook as we're given little choice but to submit to the demands of an all-seeing computer. Stuck in a simulation, we've apparently been contracted to generate combat data, perhaps forever, presumably strengthening the machine's domination. The idea that our existence is seen purely as a means to feed our technology feels ominously relevant.

Like a piece of futuristic technology, the design of the game is ultra-clean, the edges of its platforms as sharp as the

surfaces are polished. And that simple clarity extends to your moveset – an exquisitely tight array of jumps, slides and air dashes occupying your legs while your arms work on guns, grenades and various grabbable (then throwable) objects. The pristine presentation only makes it more satisfying when the scenery starts to break and tumble, with grenades specifically designed to shatter walls rather than enemy bots. A sniper on a roof? Why not bring them down to your level instead of trying to rise to theirs? Once you've been thrown into the fray, the trick is to keep moving and use all your tools at once, since your AI rivals certainly aren't programmed to show mercy.



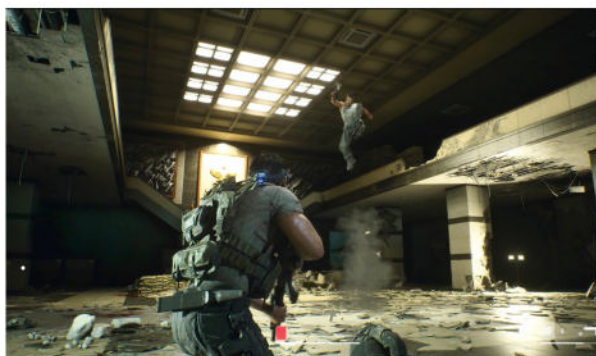
DIRECTIVE 8020

Developer/publisher Supermassive Games **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** October 2

Science fiction remains uncharted territory for horror veteran Supermassive Games, making its latest title an intriguing prospect. With a cast led by the magnetic Lashana Lynch, we join the crew of the *Cassiopeia* on an expedition to find a new home for humanity, only for a shape-shifting extraterrestrial to infiltrate the spaceship and impersonate members of the crew.

Our reflexes are tested in addition to our wits, a brief stealth section requiring us to sneak past a fleshy monster. "They've got loads of tech that they can use to evade this creature, but it starts to eat away at the ship," creative director **Will Doyle** tell us. "It strips them down to the bone and they

fight in a more primal way to survive." Genre-standard staples, undoubtedly, but your decisions will mould this narrative template. At the climax of our session, we're asked whether to shoot a crew member locked in solitary confinement or let him out, the clock counting down as our fellow crew members yell their approval or dissent. We let him walk, a biometric scanner ostensibly proving his humanity, but doubt lingers nonetheless: did we make the right call? "We're a storytelling studio. At the core of our games is the idea of a dilemma," Doyle smiles. "After the player makes a decision, they should always feel a sense of loss."



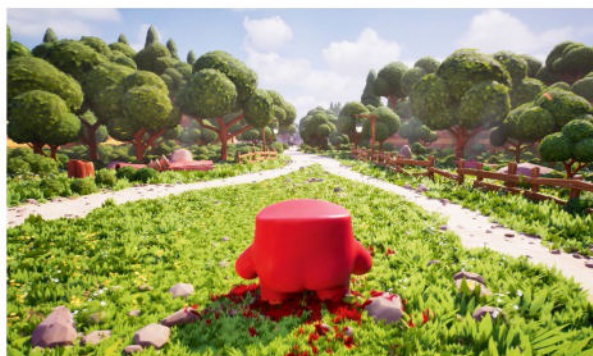
MUDANG: TWO HEARTS

Developer/publisher EVR Studio
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

EVR Studio's stylish debut promises a mixture of stealth-based action and storytelling, wrapped up in a conceit that sees skullduggery break out on the eve of an agreement between North and South Korea to reunify the peninsula.

If that sounds like a rather sober concept, *Mudang: Two Hearts* is going to be something of a surprise. For a stealth game, its reveal highlighted some rather loud and explosive weaponry, along with plenty of swift knifings. And, as the title hints, you will switch between dual leads throughout the course of the campaign – one protagonist is a soldier, the other a K-pop star.

As a whole, it looks brisk and creatively violent. It's beautiful to look at, too, with a lineup of environments capturing life on both sides of the divide, plus some extravagant and colourful staging of the action.



SUPER MEAT BOY 3D

Developer Sluggerrfly, Team Meat **Publisher** Headup
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** Early 2026

For all the genre's potential sweetness, at the core of every great 3D platformer is a chill splinter of sadism. No wonder *Super Meat Boy* appears to have made the move from two dimensions to three with such satisfying momentum. The series' buzz saws and studded walls are present in a range of chunky but complex levels, where they're joined by ultra-heated metals and villainously arranged laser grids. Meanwhile, bosses promise to bring a touch of spectacle to each run, along with their sword arms and attendant difficulty spikes.

Speaking of spectacle, the end-of-level ghost rush returns, meaning you can bow out while watching every failed attempt you've made unfold simultaneously. Everything's clearly built for the speed-running community, so you can expect to see a lot of this offal-splattered world on Twitch and TikTok in the future.



END OF ABYSS

Developer Section 9 Interactive Publisher Epic Games Publishing Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Release 2026

As we wait for *Silksong*, surprisingly few pure Metroidvanias have stepped up to fill the void; that continues to be the case at Summer Game Fest, with developers appearing wary of pitting their work against Team Cherry's blockbuster followup to *Hollow Knight*. We feel oddly at home, then, upon meeting combat technician Cel, a member of a crew investigating disturbances at an abandoned factory complex, forced to traverse its hallways alone after becoming separated from the group. The creaking facility we explore practically drips with the influence of genre staples such as *Super Metroid* and *A Link To The Past*, inspirations that are confirmed by Section 9 Interactive co-founder **Mattias Ottvall**. "They have this very simplistic [approach to] storytelling," he elaborates. "They focus on gameplay and fill their worlds with lots to explore."

We guide Cel through industrial areas populated by shambling monsters seemingly ripped out of *Resident Evil*, sprouting tentacle-like appendages as they pursue our heroine. Further inspiration from Capcom's series can be seen in the limited ammunition available for more powerful items, although encounters are surprisingly fast-paced, requiring you to time dodge rolls carefully before lining up your firearm in the fashion of twin-stick shooters. We grow fond of the shotgun in

no time at all, sending limbs flying from our adversaries with a hiss of smoke.

While our time is mainly spent in environments reminiscent of sci-fi flicks such as *Alien*, Ottvall hints that we may encounter additional biomes in the complex. We discover one such area littered with fungus-like growths and decaying corpses, one of which bursts open to reveal an infestation of scuttling creatures which leap onto Cel and drain

her health until we execute a panicked dodge roll. Our time in between these skirmishes is spent untying knotty mazes, using Cel's scanner to find shortcuts. Our brain lights up after we acquire explosives and recall the damaged walls we passed earlier. After backtracking and breaking into a laboratory, we loot grenades from the ground, gaining the ability to craft them at

benches in safe rooms. Our intrusion has been noticed, however; sentient hands crawl toward us like a Hidetaka Miyazaki fever dream.

All this leads to a showdown against a multi-headed mutant in a flooded room. We get a feel for its attack patterns only for the monster to enter a frenzy, tearing a girder off the wall and wielding it like a club. We leave Cel face-down in a shallow pool of water as the music fades and the words 'You died' crawl across the screen. We'll be better prepared when the game launches next year.

Our intrusion is noticed; sentient hands crawl toward us like a Hidetaka Miyazaki fever dream



CRISOL: THEATRE OF IDOLS

Developer Vermila Studios **Publisher** Blumhouse Games **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2025

If it wasn't for all of the reanimated idols hellbent on our demise, Tormentosa would be a fine place for some sightseeing. The rain-slicked cobblestones of its labyrinthine alleyways evoke the gothic streets of Yharnam, although the debut title from Vermila Studios draws heavily upon the architecture and iconography of Spain. "We wanted to make it as beautiful, unique and special as we could by bringing in as many elements as we could from [Spanish] folklore and twisting it in our own way," studio CEO **David Carrasco** says. As Gabriel, a holy soldier armed with a gilt firearm, our resources are limited in classic survival-horror fashion.

However, rather than searching for loot, Gabriel uses dead bodies to heal, vampirically draining their life essence. Handy, given that his firearm operates using blood instead of bullets, forcing us to pierce Gabriel's flesh and damage ourselves if we want to reload. We blow the limbs off wooden idols, only for the creatures to slowly crawl towards us in eerie silence. More intimidating still is Dolores, a hulking automaton with blood oozing from her eyes. With no clear way to fight back, we spend much of our time playing a game of cat-and-mouse, listening for the telltale stamping of her metallic feet as we delve deeper into this alluringly strange world.



THERE ARE NO GHOSTS AT THE GRAND

Developer/publisher Friday Sundae
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Nobel laureate Linus Pauling said, "If you want a good idea, get a lot of ideas". Friday Sundae was clearly paying attention, because *There Are No Ghosts At The Grand* keeps confounding expectations regarding what it is for every passing second of its short reveal trailer. You've been given a dilapidated hotel somewhere in Generic England. It looks as though your job is to restore it? With a tool that can spray flock paper on walls one second and fire out books the next? And there are ghosts? And tentacles? And you restore the hotel by day and fight the ghosts by night? And it's a musical? *There Are No Ghosts At The Grand* is somehow all these things – and even more astonishingly, its trailer delivers the kind of bouncing rim-lit confidence that suggests all these things might even come together well. A brilliant, if exhausting, reveal, then.



ILL

Developer Team Clout **Publisher** Mundfish Powerhouse
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Is it realism when you're being hunted by a giant, mutated baby which appears to have wriggled in through the ductwork? That's hard to judge, but if realism can mean horrible attention to detail when it comes to the textures and animations involved in bringing monsters to life, then Team Clout can trumpet realism all it wants. As a collaboration between game designers and the people behind movie horrors such as *Longlegs*, realism is only one of *Ill*'s selling points. At the overrun military fort in which the game is set, you can expect to tactically dismember your enemies and use the environment against them. The sickly, slippery and strange bodily contortions suggests we're in the hands of genre masters, while reassuringly solid weaponry should lead to ample splatter. This might be an ideal blend of cherished cliché and lurid excess.

MULTIFORMAT+PC



APHELION

Developer/publisher Don't Nod
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

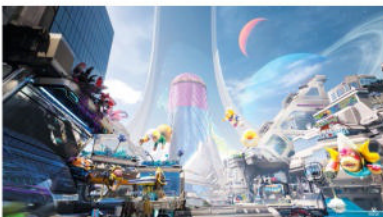
One of the more promising collaborations at this year's Xbox showcase was provided by *Apelion*, a project joining up Don't Nod with the European Space Agency. The result is an action-adventure game involving an astronaut who has crash-landed on a frozen world. An emphasis on climbing suggests that *Jusant's* vertiginous thrills are far from being forgotten. This could be pulp heaven.



NEVERWAY

Developer Coldblood Inc **Publisher** Coldblood Inc, Outersloth
Format PC **Release** TBA

Limited palettes from *Celeste* artist Pedro Medeiros lend a doomy vibe to this genre mashup. *Neverway* promises to combine elements of horror, life sims and action RPGs as you make friends, thump monsters and do a dead god's bidding. Weapons can be crafted and combat abilities come from friendship bonds; there's an emphasis on tinkering that could bring a sense of dark fun to proceedings.



HIGH ON LIFE 2

Developer/publisher Squanch Games
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

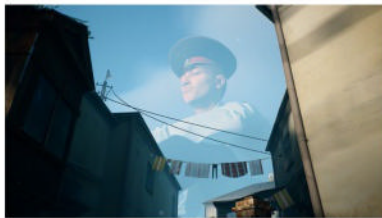
The talking guns return to talk some more. The quest is to take down Big Pharma, with the twist that you've been granted a new skateboard for this one. The mission is sure to involve the same blend of running and gunning and dodging scattershot jokes. If it all seems overly pleased with itself, it's certainly colourful, and the addition of a traversal mechanic has rarely hurt a series.



SPACECRAFT

Developer/publisher Shiro Games
Format PC **Release** 2025

With its hard-to-Google name, *SpaceCraft* doesn't like to make things easy. And there's a terrifying amount of ambition at its core, too, as you work through the cosmos, exploring planets, mining resources, crafting ships and ultimately automating your production line. It's all set in a multiplayer universe shaped by player actions. The forthcoming Early Access release should ease us in, at least.



MILITSIONER

Developer Tallboys **Publisher** Critical Reflex
Format PC **Release** TBA

Accused of a crime and tracked by a giant policeman whose vast head must graze the stars, *Militsioner* sells itself as a Kafka-infused immersive sim. Your job is to flee persecution and escape both the gaze and the grasping hands of your pursuer, manipulating people through dialogue or finding refuge in the homes of friendly NPCs. This, rather fittingly, is one you might want to keep an eye on.



WU-TANG: RISE OF THE DECEIVER

Developer/publisher Brass Lion Entertainment
Format PC **Release** TBA

From the slums of Shaolin comes this action RPG in which you team up with other players to fight through challenge rooms and restore the world of the Wu-Tang Clan to glory. Threeplayer co-op is a welcome inclusion, but the real thrill should come from the dynamic score featuring classic tracks and new material produced by Just Blaze, all wrapped up in an afro-surrealist art style.



HE WHO WATCHES

Developer/publisher Danga Games
Format PC **Release** 2025

A medieval *Portal*? Almost. *He Who Watches* is a dungeon puzzler in which each challenge room is built around a unique idea. You walk on walls, experiment with strange substances, move lots of blocks, and work with a magic arrow that has to be recalled every time it's used. It's also heartening to see a puzzle chamber that isn't filled with jokes about getting back to the office.



AT FATE'S END

Developer/publisher Thunder Lotus
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

Thunder Lotus, creator of *Spirittfarer*, is back with an action adventure in which your family tree is also your skill tree. Kinetic sword-based combat take place across luminous 2D worlds, and each sibling you defeat will add techniques to your arsenal. *At Fate's End* also promises the ability to shape encounters through the tactical use of dialogue. A fascinating prospect all round.



SCOTT PILGRIM EX

Developer/publisher Tribute Games
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** 2026

Bryan Lee O'Malley's gloriously blasé antihero returns in another pixel-art brawler that's all about improvised weaponry and evocative backdrops. Characters can be upgraded throughout the campaign, and fourplayer co-op is an essential part of the package. With Tribute Games on development duties and Anamanaguchi providing the music, this seems certain to be a delight.

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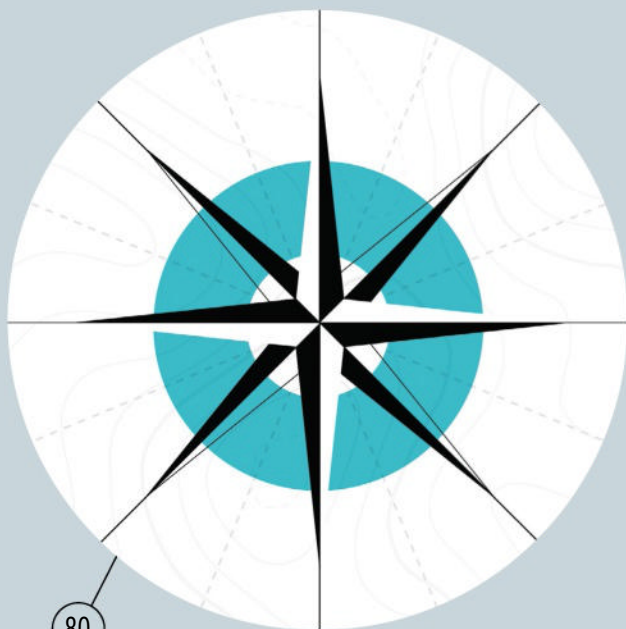
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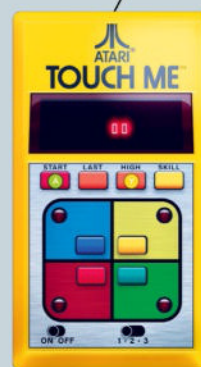
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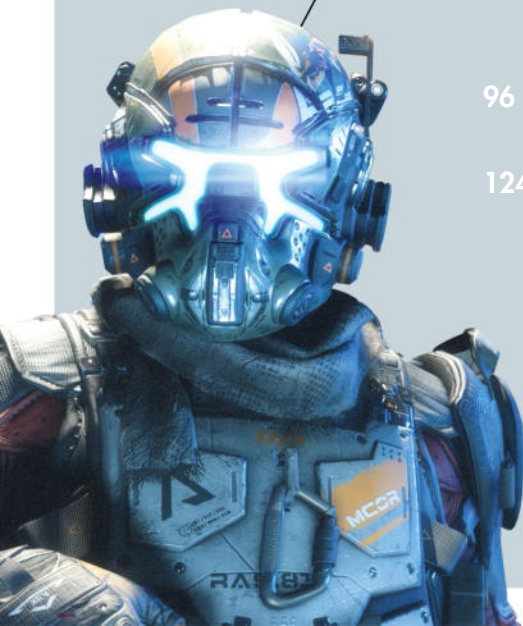
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SPACE



While lunafilament is used to build cities and heal wounds, its use cases are varied: as a Pragmata, Diana was created using the mysterious substance

ODDITY

How Capcom's singular sci-fi shooter is delivering on promises made long ago

By Niall O'Donoghue



Game *Pragmata*
Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series
Release TBA

REM CYCLE

We find few signs of life as we explore, making our discovery of the crew's quarters feel all the more incongruous. In the midst of the sterile space station is an enclave of humanity, packed with creature comforts such as a TV screen and comfortable furniture, all generated using a Read Earth Memory chip, a device used to 3D-print familiar objects. "It was developed on the lunar research station to provide comfort and a connection to Earth for crew members living far from home," Yonghee says. Beyond satisfying our curiosity, he teases that discovering more of these chips may benefit us in other ways.



ew things are quite as intriguing as a delayed project. As hype builds for long-awaited games such as *Silksong* and *Grand Theft Auto VI*, it's hard to resist the temptation to comb over trailers and screenshots, piecing together clues in an attempt to guess what the final production will look like. Capcom has had us on the hook for five years now, ever since it released the first trailer for *Pragmata*, giving us a brief but tantalising window into its futuristic world. Clearly an awful lot has happened since then, including a global pandemic, the rise of generative AI and the launch of a new console generation, to name just a handful of events. Through all of this, the release date for *Pragmata* has been pushed back ever further, with no signs of life provided by Capcom since it was indefinitely delayed in 2023. Plenty of time, then, in which our imaginations could run wild. As we fire up a demo at this year's Summer Game Fest, though, our preconceived notions fade away. The reality, it turns out, is far more interesting than anything we could have come up with.

The contrast between our protagonists is striking. Systems auditor Hugh Williams cuts an imposing figure in his white space suit, kitted out with industrial gear in the manner of Isaac Clarke. The young girl accompanying him is tiny in comparison, a waifish figure with long blonde hair and bright blue eyes matching the colour of her oversized coat. In a trailer, she excitedly introduces herself as a Pragmata, a



type of android, named D-I-0336-7. "Look," a wryly amused Williams replies, "how about we call you Diana?" Williams immediately occupies a position akin to a father figure for Diana, recalling the adventures of Kratos and Atreus. "While he's a kind person, he often speaks his mind," producer **Naoto Oyama** says, noting the counterpoint that Diana provides to Williams' stoic disposition. "She's naturally curious, and has an exceptional ability to learn from her environment. Due to her limited data accumulation, she often reacts with childlike innocence."

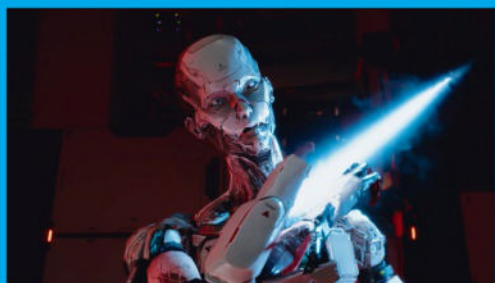
However, in our demo, which takes place when the pair first meet, the dynamic is flipped. We find Williams unconscious on the floor while Diana rummages in a nearby crate, retrieving a strange, claw-like device from inside. Powered by luna-filament, a precious resource mined from the surface of the Moon, she scans Williams from head to toe, fully healing him down to a cellular level. Our respite is short-lived, however. Williams has been dispatched by his employers, the sinisterly titled Delphi Corporation, to investigate the lunar research facility Cradle in the aftermath of an earthquake. But something has gone wrong with IDUS, the artificial-intelligence system that oversees the worker and security bots deployed around the station. A chilling four-note motif presages a message from IDUS intoned over a nearby intercom, its synthetic voice marking us as intruders. A tall, humanoid security bot is soon summoned, its expressionless face ►

"DIANA IS NATURALLY CURIOUS,
AND HAS AN EXCEPTIONAL ABILITY
TO LEARN FROM HER ENVIRONMENT"

Blue light extends like
a tether from Diana
towards enemies she
attempts to hack,
making her stand out
all the more clearly in
this alien environment



COMPLETING A HACKING MINIGAME IS ONE THING, BUT DOING IT IN REALTIME WHILE BEING CHASED BY A HOMICIDAL ROBOT?



ABOVE IDUS's robotic crew attack with hands and projectiles, but some also wield energy blades, as if Williams didn't have enough to worry about. RIGHT It's unclear if there's a traditional levelling system, but resources can be used to unlock and upgrade Diana's abilities



reminiscent of those of *Dishonored*'s clockwork soldiers, and approaches us in eerie silence. Williams yells for Diana to hide behind him as we fire a salvo of bullets at the assailant, only for our rounds to ricochet off of its plated armour to little effect. Rather than take shelter, though, Diana latches onto Williams' shoulder, the soundtrack swelling as her eyes light up like computer screens. A holographic display manifests in front of her as a beam of blue light emits from her palm. "Bypassing first and second firewalls. Hooking control protocols," she mutters, eyes narrowed with focus. "Initiating hack!"

We regain control of Williams, but something has changed. A two-dimensional grid materialises on our head-up display to the right of our adversary, representing its internal security system. Completing a hacking minigame is one thing, but doing it in realtime while being chased by a homicidal robot? Entirely another. Yet that is the task demanded here, as we move Williams backwards using the left thumbstick while simultaneously navigating this digital maze. We move through nodes by tapping face buttons, making our way to an exit point indicated by a green power icon while manoeuvring around impassable grey blocks. Our enemy continues to attack as we tease out the puzzle, forcing us to tap the left bumper to activate thrusters built into Williams' suit and dash to safety. In the face of this pressure, we briefly consider rushing through the puzzle as quickly as possible, but find ourselves tempted to take detours to chase down bright blue icons dotted around the grid: the more we can chain together before reaching the exit, the longer the duration of our completed hack. We quickly chart out an optimum path, one eye nervously watching our approaching adversary as we mash out the required inputs. Our multitasking is rewarded with the satisfying sight of the robot short-circuiting, electricity crackling as its protective armour flares outwards to expose a vulnerable underbelly. Squeezing the left trigger, we smoothly transition back into combat and unload a full clip, reducing the bot to a pile of scrap. We take a quick breather. It was quite the tricky dance to pull off. But more complicated moves are soon to follow.

The future, we're told, "isn't just a dream – it's a promise". Such is the breathless enthusiasm with which the Delphi Corporation advertises lunafilement. Combined with the company's use of "advanced generative AI", slick marketing videos depict cities being constructed near-instantaneously using this miracle material. "It's a dreamlike substance, and it's being studied for its remarkable ability to replicate not just the shape but also the properties and functions of any

object, provided its data is available," game director **Cho Yonghee** tells us. "Everything from microchips and vehicles to massive structures can now be 3D-printed on the Moon." Cradle, the home of this research, is a clinical environment, its industrial trimmings evoking the visual language of science-fiction films such as *Alien*. Yonghee's low-tech approach to the game's aesthetic was more inspired by *Black Mirror* than Ridley Scott's masterpiece, however, paired with a desire to depict a near-futuristic world rather than one that felt overly fantastical. "We felt this was the best way to let players feel immersed in the game's world, as they could relate to it more closely."

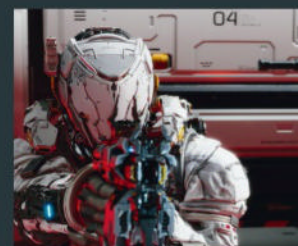
Williams and Diana navigate barren hallways as we work our way towards the solar power plant, attempting to activate the station's power generator and return to Earth. We use thrusters to leap, hover and dash through a series of obstacle courses, dodging lasers and traversing chasms as we attempt to bypass security systems locking us out of certain areas. Overriding them requires the completion of simple puzzles with Diana by tapping prompted face buttons in the manner of rhythm games before dealing with robots deployed by IDUS to hunt us down. The discovery of a yellow hacking node, one of several consumables, presents us with additional considerations during these encounters. While carrying these items, puzzle grids will display a yellow cell, which lowers an enemy's defences if linked to the chain during a successful hack. We further augment our arsenal when we discover a powerful shockwave gun, used to dispatch foes quickly at short range, plus a stasis net, which can temporarily stun enemies in the manner of an EMP grenade. Aside from our primary firearm, however, ammunition is limited, requiring careful use of these tools as we face down new foes deployed by IDUS, such as hulking bipedal walkers and airborne drones.

Our tactics mature as we acclimatise to this blend of cerebral puzzle solving and all-out action. We fall into a rhythm as we manoeuvre around our opponents using our thrusters, carefully monitoring our suit temperature to avoid overheating, and timing when to use repair gauges to top up our health bar. Pulsing techno fades in and out as we transition between hacking sequences and combat, slowly learning how best to prioritise our adversaries: when hacking weakened foes, for example, blue nodes can often be ignored in favour of rushing to the exit for a quick kill. Similarly, we opt to use our consumables carefully, intentionally ignoring yellow hacking nodes when hacking rank-and-file enemies to ensure that we can use them against heavy hitters.

Further complexity is introduced through the ability to target different body parts. Indeed, some sequences ►

ILLUSORY WALLS

If you have to fight for your life in a facility operated by a rogue AI, it's handy to do so while accompanied by a code-breaking android. But Diana's abilities are crucial for exploration as well as infiltration. While searching off the beaten path, we hit what appears to be a dead end, only for our chipper accomplice to identify the wall as a hologram, dematerialising it to reveal a hidden passage. Our curiosity is rewarded with a yellow hacking node, while Yonghee hints that thorough players will be rewarded with rare items and combat equipment.



DEFYING
GRAVITY

Pragmata's initial trailer presents the arresting image of Williams slowly walking through an apocalyptic cityscape, meeting Diana and the holographic cat keeping her company. The sky appears to shatter as a satellite falls towards the ground and Williams and Diana shoot upwards, rocketing right into the path of the enormous object. Diana rapidly scans the satellite as Williams appears to 3D-print a canister using a backpack on his suit, used to deploy a mesh shield around the pair as they fly out into the blackness of space. Capcom won't confirm many details about locations we'll visit during our journey, but we suspect that this vision has something to do with the Delphi Corporation.



evoke the survival-horror tension of *Dead Space* as we blow the legs off of approaching sentries, anxiously monitoring our depleting supply of ammunition as the robots drag themselves silently towards us. While surprisingly intuitive, it's quite a lot to take in. However, Oyama emphasises that you won't need to become a multi-tasking maestro right from the outset. "We've designed the game so that players can gradually get used to each mechanic, and as you progress through the game, the strategic depth also evolves and increases," he explains. "It should allow players to get used to the game and grow as they play."

Our stress levels increase as we approach the generator room via an elevator, powering it by completing pipe-based puzzles laid out in a circular grid while fighting off waves of combatants. But while we fight for our life, Diana remains carefree, even casually asking Williams "are we there yet?" after a particularly taxing encounter. We went into our hands-on session intending to identify references to high-minded science fiction, but our mind instead turns to Ice Cube at the wheel of an SUV. Not a terrible comparison to make, as it turns out: in classic road-trip fashion, we can expect the bond between Williams and Diana to deepen as they explore Cradle, their journey punctuated with moments of humanity. "Initially, [Diana] simply follows Hugh out of curiosity, but over time they grow closer as they work together," Oyama says. "As they progress, Diana learns more about humans and Earth through her interactions with Hugh."

We finally make our way up to a large room reminiscent of NASA's mission-control centre and begin booting up the power generator. Shutters covering the domed ceiling slowly unfurl, revealing a sprawling network of pipes and machinery on the surface of the Moon outside. Before we can complete our mission, though, IDUS halts our progress, summoning a hulking mech. We tense up, preparing ourselves for our first major boss fight, but a tap on our shoulder brings us back to reality: our session is complete. Scouring game footage later on, we discover that the tanky mech is capable of charging across the battlefield using thrusters built into its back, as well as launching salvos of missiles from shoulder-mounted cannons. Even when we replay the demo, though, and hustle to the generator room as quickly as possible, our Capcom representative removes the controller from our grip before we can start the fight. We'll have to rejoin this duo another time.

It's hard to point to other games that are directly comparable to *Pragmata's* blend of realtime action and puzzle solving: we think of inputting guitar solos during

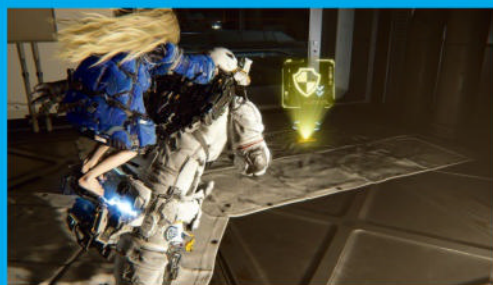
combat in *Brütal Legend*, or even desperately navigating our inventory in *Dark Souls* to find an antidote for the toxin that is currently draining our life force. It comes as no surprise, then, when Oyama tells us that implementing this unique system has been challenging for his team, and a large factor in the decision to push back *Pragmata's* release. "Ever since we released the concept trailer, the team has been deep in trial and error, refining the gameplay," he admits. "We wanted to make sure the final product is something every member of the team can confidently call fun."

These deferrals have presented Capcom with the opportunity to refine the game's visuals, however, efforts most noticeable in the handsome lighting effects used to portray the electricity coursing through hacked robots. "The result is something we think looks better than ever," Oyama continues. "Right now, we're putting the final touches on everything."

After two years of silence, these efforts were finally showcased to the world once more this summer, when a new trailer was released for Summer Game Fest. In it, we return to the scrap of paper used by Diana to inform us about delays in previous updates, with lines scribbled through "2022" and "2023" and a crying stick figure doodled in the corner. But, like magic, a wave of particles washes away this note, replacing it with an endearing smiley face and a simple message: "2026. It's real". We're curious about what this moment feels like for Oyama and his team, given the inherent scepticism that typically surrounds long-awaited projects. "We've all seen the reaction videos and comments on social media, and it's motivating to see the passion and support from those who've been waiting for an update," Oyama says. "At the same time, there is so much more about the game that we haven't revealed yet."

A long gestation period can lead to impossible expectations from players. For every success story such as *The Last Guardian* and *Bayonetta 3*, widely beloved upon their release despite their tardiness, there's a *Duke Nukem Forever* or *Aliens: Colonial Marines* waiting to prove naysayers right about the pitfalls of extended development cycles. It would be easy to view *Pragmata* as an artefact of the past — its announcement predates the PS5 launch, after all. But Capcom's ambitious shooter feels fresh and nimble under the thumbs, a throwback to an era when the studio's name could be found on the boxes of games with boldly innovative concepts, such as *Okami*. Nebulous images of Williams and Diana wandering through abandoned streets have been replaced with a concrete vision of a fascinating puzzle-action hybrid, one that deserves its time in the limelight after so long in limbo. ■

"IT'S MOTIVATING TO SEE THE PASSION AND SUPPORT. AT THE SAME TIME, THERE IS SO MUCH MORE THAT WE HAVEN'T REVEALED YET"

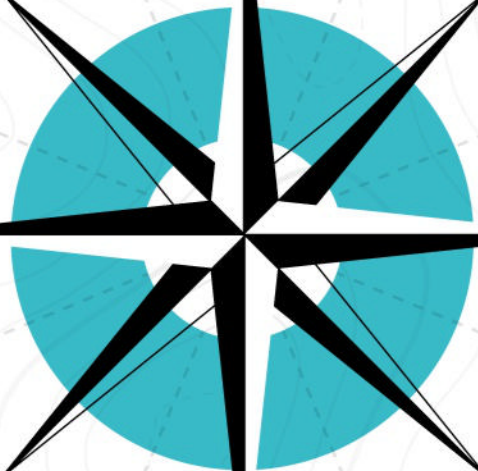


MAIN While Williams follows in the tradition of engineers exploited by malevolent companies in sci-fi, his background in security makes him pretty handy with firearms.

LEFT Yonghee insists that the homicidal security system was not inspired by the real-world rise of AI

ALL ROADS

R





LEAD TO AAM

Are open-world games
one genre or many? And
where are they headed?

By CHRISTIAN DONLAN

Every work of art begins with a sheet of blank paper, and every sheet of blank paper offers one fundamental choice: portrait or landscape? For the past few generations, videogame developers have often chosen landscape, setting their adventures across sprawling maps that you can navigate as you choose, concentrating on the narrative or scattering to the distant hills just to see what might be hiding there. These are open-world games, and together we've spent millions of hours in places like this. We've collected Agility Orbs, stolen cars from strangers (and then backed over them), climbed towers to synchronise our viewpoints, and faced penalties for leaving the mission area — and really, could you judge us for that? ▶



pen-world games have showcased design at its most luxurious, extravagant and intoxicating.

They've given us the freedom so many videogames promise – and struggle with. Forget building missions; why not build entire neighbourhoods in games such as *Crackdown* and let the mission flow where it will? Forget building ski runs; why not opt for *Steep*'s mountain range, individual slopes waiting to be chained together in new ways?

And yet 2025 sees open worlds themselves in a quandary. On one hand, the genre of choice is losing ground to newer, and perhaps less risky, options such as Soulslikes and Roguelikes. On the other, the biggest game in the history of the form is due to land in 2026, and it promises to deliver an open world created with the kind of lavish attention to detail that no other studio could afford. Many design teams are already scattering in the shadow of *GTAVI*, which won't only recreate a huge stretch of Florida but also the modern milieu of social media and unnerving politics that flows through it. How can you compete with that?

This series' impact is so great that, for many years, open worlds were synonymous with *GTA*, just as shooters were once known as Doomlikes. And yet *GTAVI* will arrive in a world in which many other teams have left their mark on games that set their adventures loose across wide stretches of terrain. It's reached the point at which open worlds are no longer one genre, but a constellation of different, often overlapping subgenres.

So, with *GTAVI* dominating the conversation, now's the time to look across this complex genre and ask what it is, how it works, and where it's going. The best aspect to focus on is variation. What sub-categories does the modern open-world game fall into, and what makes each variation work? Let's explore. And see those mountains in the distance? We'll *definitely* be able to climb them.



Museums

"You need to immerse players"

'Museums' might seem like a strange way to classify games as varied as *GTA*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Saints Row*. But for all their differences – parkour across the pyramids, pull off a car-jacking in ersatz Bel-Air – they all have one thing in common: in each, the open world is a means of recreating the real one, regardless of whether

that's the modern era with all its satirical possibilities or the ancient world with its cast of historical figures.

Ben Hall is a world director at Ubisoft, where he's worked on games such as *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*. "It's always a challenge," he says, when asked what it's like to try to build a world that's not only a recreation of aspects of this one but is also full of life and feels genuine. One of the first challenges is compression. Or, to put it another way: "When we first started looking at Ancient Greece for *Odyssey*, we knew we weren't going to be able to build all of it." This holds true whether you're recreating a 2,000-year-old archipelago or a fictionalised version of LA. It becomes a process of focusing on what's important and building what Hall calls "anchor points".

"For example, Athens becomes the big anchor point," he says of *Odyssey*. "OK, that's going to be our biggest city. Then we start with sketches. We start with whiteboards, we start in Photoshop, then draw lines between things in terms of the locations that pop out as being places that we want to use." From there, Hall and his team turn to the landscape, and for *Odyssey* the guiding principle was akin to a honeycomb. The team created individual cells that were interesting and delivered on the promise of this ancient world by themselves, and then surrounded them with different cells that did the same things but in other ways. The end result? Scale but also variation. "We wanted to create an odyssey for the player," Hall says. "But one of my tasks was to make sure we didn't create a world that was just fatiguing to travel through."

Despite the contraction, it was important to Hall's team that, when players looked at the map, they still saw something that looked like a footprint of Ancient Greece, and you see this tension in almost all games that try to recreate the real world. *Driver: San Francisco*'s version of its home city is tiny in comparison to the real thing, but all the famous parts you look for are there and largely in the right place. Los Santos may not quite be LA, but its renamed districts cleave to the original: Pillbox Hill is where you'd find Bunker Hill; Chumash is right where you'd go searching for Malibu.

And those swapped-out names are a reminder that open-world games often satirise the places they're recreating, whether broadly, as in *Saints Row*, or with the kind of smirking aside *Assassin's Creed* likes to pull off. **Alex Hutchinson** worked on *Assassin's Creed 3* before making the *Savage Planet* games, which blend open worlds with slapstick, and he feels the genre is an ideal vehicle for humour. To him, it's all about letting go of that thing most comedians will cling to: control of the timing. "I think in open-world games, specifically," he says, "once you give up the idea that there's authorial timing, and you say that, no, the player is in charge of



Ben Hall,
creative director
at Ubisoft Toronto

timing — and it's like slapstick, and you're just setting up the opportunity for jokes or scenarios that are funny — then suddenly it becomes the interactive comedy, and then that's funny again." Why does this work so well with open worlds? "Because you need to put the player in deep. You need to immerse players in a satirical world and let them stumble across the bizarre situations and the excessive consequences."

It's not solely about the freedom, then. It's about the density of systems and elements open worlds offer.



Nature parks

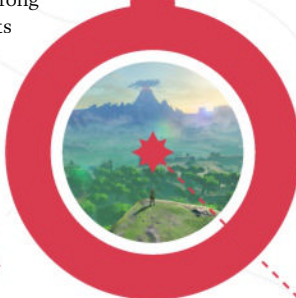
"I need a mountain"

Nothing captures the deep strangeness of videogames quite like those that are concerned with nature. Here's a world of painstaking design, but it's all in the service of making something that doesn't look man-made at all. When it goes well, you have a mountain from *Breath Of The Wild*: inhumanly vast, and yet also a teasing, playful puzzle to climb in the moment. And when it goes wrong, the illusion can be ruined instantly.

Richard Hogg is an artist and game designer, and one of the small team behind *Flock*, an open-world bird-collecting game. "A problem I have with a lot of nature games is that they don't feel natural," he says. "Specifically in the way that different environments have way more contrast between them and very little overlap compared to the real world, right?" He laughs. "That's the thing that I notice a lot: when you're walking around and one minute you're in a particular area, and then you've moved into another area and everything is suddenly different." You might call this the *Just Cause 2* phenomenon. The fictional Panau is a thrillingly varied open world, but there's a line separating snow from forest and forest from desert. How do you avoid that?

"There's a term that ecologists use that I really like," Hogg says. "It's 'mosaic habitats.'" He gives the example of Britain before humans. What do you see? A blend of woodland and meadow, without a strong delineation between them. "There were pockets where maybe a tree had fallen down, and a bunch of creatures had come and grazed the area. You end up with a clearing where there's grass growing, and over time you get patches and pockets of different biomes." This was the approach the team aimed for with *Flock*.

That attempt to capture reality helped with *Flock*'s puzzles, which revolve around ▶



RIGHT When it comes to urban needs, *AC: Odyssey*'s cities deliver the goods. **MAIN** *GTA VI* builds on the expanses of Los Santos. **INSET** The best mission marker is one you can see at all times, which makes *Zelda*'s giant mountains pretty hard to beat



"ONE OF MY TASKS WAS TO MAKE SURE WE DIDN'T CREATE A WORLD THAT WAS JUST FATIGUING"

ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROAM



"THE CHALLENGE
WITH DOING
NATURE IS THAT
THERE'S NO
STRAIGHT LINE
IN NATURE"

MAIN America before the skyscraper age meant the designers of *AC3* had to get creative with level design. INSET *Flock*'s critters were inspired by the real world. RIGHT *Burnout Paradise* is among the most kinetic of open worlds, and also one of the most beautiful



EDGE



how and where you find certain birds. "We tried to be as true as we could, which was to make it like real life as much as possible," Hogg says. This meant thinking about what actually happens with birdwatching. How do birds camouflage themselves? How do they give themselves away? "Some make too much noise," he says. "Maybe some of them are in a flock, and you see that from a distance. And then you go and follow them for a bit, and then you find them. We're just trying to come at it from thinking about how the real world works." Nature, then, is an approach to the environment as well as a set of visual ideals.

One of videogames' most immersive trips into nature over the past decade has been *A Short Hike*, made by solo developer **Adam Robinson-Yu**. He started with a process he says is akin to sculpting. "I didn't really think too hard about it [at first]," he says. "I was like: 'I need a mountain'. The tools in Unity that I use for this are very much just like you're drawing in MS Paint. So you're building the height map of the world, and I just sculpted a mountain, sculpted some hills and valleys and stuff, completely on a whim. And [then] I would press play, and I'd have Claire running around those little hills and mountains, and I'd be like, 'Oh, this hill feels fun.'" From there, he would often add details that were inspired by his own memories of hiking.

For Hutchinson, nature is tricky for practical reasons. "I think the reason why buildings were the sort of launchpad for *Assassin's*, especially, is that they're very structured," he says. "Games are built on metrics, and level design is often built on metrics. So you jump a certain height and a certain distance, and in a city you can grid it out and make it understandable. The challenge with doing nature is that there's no straight line in nature." But nature offered something the *Assassin's Creed 3* team needed: scale. "We quickly realised that the biggest building [in America at that time] was two storeys tall – so, if we wanted to give you that feeling of free running and free climbing, nature needed to be a big part of it." In response to this, the game's cities got smaller and, as the team got used to a world without straight lines, nature opened up everywhere.



Speedways

"It's not just distraction"

Is there an open world more beautiful or audacious than *Burnout Paradise*'s? This collection of streets seems



chaotic at first, only to reveal itself over time to be a thing of beauty and precision. Ultimately, it's something of a particle accelerator, in which you are flung around and around, the most unlikely connections between one path and the next only becoming possible at high speed.

Paradise is not alone in providing open worlds for vehicles – that looming behemoth is called *Grand Theft Auto* for a reason. *Paradise* isn't even alone in being a game exclusively about vehicles rather than people. The *Forza Horizon* team at Playground Games have turned everywhere from the Outback to East Anglia into an automotive playground, while Ubisoft's *The Crew* allows you to drive all the way across the US. But if open-world design is already tricky, how is the scale of the world being built impacted by this brand-new variable, speed?

According to Hogg, who's worked with speedy characters on *Flock*, it's easy to get this issue back to front. "You can't keep changing the scale of the world to feel right with the speed of the bird," he laughs. "The question really is, how does the scale of the world impact the speed that you can travel around it? Because it would have been impossible to keep adding and removing bits of the world to make it feel the right size in *Flock*. But we could keep making the bird go faster and slower." And so *Flock*'s open world features ways to speed you up and slow you down, depending on whether the environment is filled with detail or a place that should be enjoyed in a rush of wind and a blur of surroundings.

Before working on games such as *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry*, Hall started his career with the *Burnout* series and had to think about open worlds in which you would often be moving at over 100 miles per hour. The secret? Two opposing forces, which Hall refers to as flow and distraction. "It was always about making sure there was that fluidity," he says of his time on *Paradise*. "It was something that the team was keen on – that there were ribbons of flow throughout the world. And that's something where I learned a lot about world design, world creation, and the flow and the movement of the players through spaces."

Flow is *Burnout* in microcosm: you start moving, and the road seems to become a collaborator, arcing you across vast distances. But what about distraction? "It's not just distraction, but agency-driven distraction," Hall explains. "That was one thing *Burnout Paradise* did incredibly well. It was offering so many various different things that you could do while you were doing something else, but it was up to you if you took the risk to do it."

One of the interesting things about open-world games is that designs are often porous: lessons learned in one kind of game can crop up in another very different one, just as open-world games can belong to a handful of different subgenres at the same time. As an example,

Hall eventually found that the flow he'd learned about with *Paradise* was useful for making sense of the on-foot world of *Assassin's Creed*. "Jumping from a racing game to *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* was a big change in philosophy and mindset, but the great thing was that I was building things for an *Assassin's Creed* game. I wanted to step back and learn about and understand what it takes to make these locations. And then, when you start looking at the parkour system and the movement of the parkour, that's where I could start to think about using some of those learnings of fluidity and movement, making sure that we've got full paths for the player to take. And there's always somewhere to go. There's always something trying to catch your eye and get your attention to go somewhere else."



Climbing frames

"We always try to merge the desire with the distraction"

While it's exciting to walk around a version of New York City that's been painstakingly crafted to mimic the real thing (even if it's now called Liberty City), there's something to be said for skyscraper cities where you aren't stuck in traffic at the bottom of the canyons the whole time. Enter the climbing frame, a kind of open world that has volume, and where player powers – superpowers in *Crackdown* and *Prototype*, parkour prowess in *Assassin's Creed*, *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* and *Dying Light* – open the entire world out for you to play. Depending on these powers, the games have very different textures, but they all share one commonality: you aren't only racing to the horizon any more. You're climbing, gliding, grasping and jumping.

"Verticality is really important," Hall says, "especially in the *Assassin's* games. It really is a climbing-frame game, and it's about moving the players through those spaces and going up and down things as much as anything else." But not all climbing frames are alike – even before you get to the different traversal options you're given. "There's a big difference between the buildings you're creating in a city like London and how you actually interact with them and how you play with those spaces," Hall says. "It's about creating those desire lines for players to take, to make sure they want to get to certain things in certain places. How do you attract the players who want to spend their time elsewhere to climb this particular monument you need them to climb?"

Change the *Assassin's* game, though, and the climbing frame changes too. "Something like Ancient Greece, ►



A *Short Hike* creator
Adam Robinson-Yu



Hollow Ponds'
Richard Hogg and
Ricky Haggett

that was a different challenge,” Hall explains, “because a lot of the buildings and the points of interest we were building were much smaller. There are some pretty big elements within ancient Greece, and certainly the temples and things were epic and large, but not like St Paul’s Cathedral.”

These shortcomings can shape everything about a climbing-frame game. “And that’s kind of where some of the ideation came from when it came to building some of the big statues that we put around Greece,” Hall explains. “They were always based on mythological or historical fact, always based on working with the research team, working with a historian. But what we did is we took a fantastical approach to the giant statue that then gave us something epic to climb. It gave the player that distraction. So you could be on your main quest, going across to a different town, but like: ‘Oh, there’s *that* — I’m going to go check that out’. Then you get that climbing, you get that verticality.”

Hutchinson, meanwhile, worked on the first *Assassin’s* game to allow you to climb through interiors, *Assassin’s Creed 3*, a shift he says made the game world feel less like a “carpet” that you were moving over. Suddenly you were dipping in and out of a place that had different surfaces and complex structures. In *Revenge Of The Savage Planet*, he and his team have taken things further: they’re deconstructing the climbing frame itself.

“So for the *Savage Planet* games, we tried to imagine the world as three layers,” he says. “It’s a *Metroidvania*, so you start by walking around on the ground, and then you get the ability to swim down underneath those areas and spelunk into buried places. And then later you get the ability to jump and go up above all that.” He pauses for a second. “So I think, when it’s most successful, you can explore the same environment two or three times, in terms of physical space.” He notes that this is the same approach taken by the most recent *Zelda, Tears Of The Kingdom*: Hyrule all around, sky islands above and the Depths below. And all you need to do is find out how to get there.



Hunting grounds

“Give players space to build a cognitive map”

Most open worlds will include some kind of combat, but a special handful elevate it to the main event. These are the hunting grounds, open spaces that set you free to stalk foes and even toy with them before taking them down. They offer landscapes built for planning and

execution — and for that wonderful moment when everything goes wrong and you’re left to improvise.

Hall has worked on exploration games including *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* and hunting grounds such as *Far Cry 6*, and although all Ubisoft open worlds share a certain design vocabulary, he says that the places often have little else in common. “The landscapes are very different,” he says. “And that was one of the big learning curves for me, moving throughout these different types of genres. You’ve got to learn the core gameplay loop of what you’re making, and with a *Far Cry* game, typically speaking, we try to have these big, open environments.”

These open environments are there to offer you as much agency as possible, while also encouraging you to use your agency. And agency means different things to different people. To put it another way, Hall says that, “when you come up to a point of interest that’s going to be full of enemies that you’re going to spend the next 30 minutes trying to figure out the best way to eliminate, we want to make sure that we’ve got a space that offers different opportunities to different players and different play styles as well.” As a result, Hall and his team build their hunting grounds while thinking of different categories of players: runners, stealth players, and tactical players who like to scan everything they see and shoot from a distance. “These people use all the gadgets and plan everything perfectly, until things go sideways and then everything starts exploding, which is how it tends to play out,” he says. “Or at least for me.”

Often, considering the needs of these players involves focusing not only on a specific area of a map but also the area around it. “We’ll always be thinking about the landscape directly surrounding a point of interest, and then how the landscape surrounding that landscape informs that landscape inside of it.” He pauses for a moment to find the right analogy. “It becomes like an onion skin, where we think outwards. For *Far Cry 6*, the vast majority of the terrain was sculpted with purpose, because we’ve got so many different systems laying on top of each other, and so many different purposes for that landscape and how it connects to other landscapes.”

A crucial aspect of the design brings all kinds of players together, though. “Take vantage points,” Hall says. “Having vantage points on an enemy stronghold is super-important, and that’s about having the ability to give players time and space to be able to build a cognitive map of where they are.” Whatever your approach, then, if you’re hunting enemies, you want an internal idea of the landscape you’re moving through. This allows the designers to signpost the kind of uses the current landscape might offer, and it also means you don’t have to look at the map as much, ruining the flow.

"Because we give players these big worlds to explore, we work on them for three or however many years the production takes," Hall laughs. "So we've learned them intricately, and inside and out. We know exactly where to go. We need to get the players up to speed with that. So it's about giving them opportunities to [see a space] and not get overwhelmed by the amount of everything that's around them."



Pocket worlds

"We're making games for old people"

Large open worlds offer players hours of freeform fun as they explore the landscape and engage with overlapping systems, often to chaotic effect. But large open worlds, as designers such as Hall will often point out, are also overwhelming. They require fast-travel systems to cut down on backtracking, and their maps can quickly fill up with icons and side distractions so that they don't feel empty. At its worst, this can feel like clutter. It can suggest that, because there's so much in the world, very little of it is actually important.

It's no wonder, then, that over the past few years there has been a trend towards smaller, more compact open worlds. Games such as *Flock*, *Sludge Life* and *Proteus* reveal an indie community that's often inspired by the ideas developed in big-budget games from large teams, but wants to explore those ideas with a little more focus. And sometimes the worlds are compact for more personal reasons.

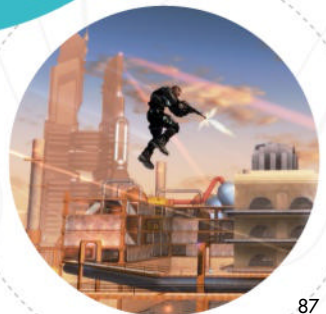
A *Short Hike* is about a very modest mountain chain and a bird named Claire with a mission to get to the top of it. "I sometimes have this tendency to get a little bit hung up over details and thinking too hard about things," Robinson-Yu says on the topic of his game's small footprint and simple agenda. A *Short Hike* actually started as a distraction from a game he was already working on. "I was like, 'Oh, this will be a way for me to motivate myself and get something done,'" he laughs. "I was seeing this as a small project that didn't need to be perfect." From the start, then, its scale was a comfort. "I was [thinking]: am I going to be able to fill this with enough stuff? And then I'm like, 'If I can't, the game will be mid and that's OK. This game initially wasn't even going to be sold. It doesn't need to be perfect'"

In terms of what to put in the game, though, it seems that compact worlds benefit from a similarly compact ▶



"WHEN IT'S MOST SUCCESSFUL, YOU CAN EXPLORE THE SAME ENVIRONMENT TWO OR THREE TIMES"

INSET Link's glider is an eminently nickable piece of design, offering no-fuss traversal over wide spaces. MAIN Signage can do a lot of storytelling, but so can incidental details, as in *FC6*. RIGHT *Crackdown* is a straightforward idea – the city as children's playpen



ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROAM



**"SOME GAMES
CAN MAKE IT FEEL
LIKE YOU'RE NOT
REALLY EXPLORING,
YOU'RE JUST
TRAVELLING"**

MAIN *A Short Hike's* design drew inspiration from *BOTW's* Korok seeds. INSET Has *Proteus's* mood and sense of rustic colour ever been bettered? RIGHT *The Savage Planet* games are comedy, but their open worlds still find space for genuine wonder



EDGE

approach to design, which leads to what Robinson-Yu refers to as "micro puzzles". Inspired by *Breath Of The Wild's* Korok seeds, there are "mini Where's Waldo moments for when you're just walking down a path, and things that will draw your attention and create interest in your mind," he says. "[It's] to stop you getting too bored, or to pose a question: what's around that corner? Or: oh, I've noticed a circle of rocks – that could be something."

"I was thinking, can I make gameplay out of the player noticing something?" Robinson-Yu asks. "Out of them paying attention, and then feeling acknowledged for noticing something interesting – like they see a weird-looking rock. I just want to have that kind of relationship with the players."

Having worked on *AC3* and *Far Cry 4*, Hutchinson has been involved in some huge open worlds, but his latest game, *Revenge Of The Savage Planet*, keeps things smaller, with four relatively modest planets for you to move through, each with its own relatively modest open worlds. "The joke became that we're making games for old people," he laughs. "We have a life, you know. I want to see my kids. I have friends. I don't want a thousand hours of game. And every time someone told me that this or that open world is 400 kilometres square or 1,000 hours long, I'm just like, 'I will never play that'"

Hutchinson says that now he is older and has money but limited time, he wants to spend that time wisely. For a compact open world, that means one thing. "We went for density, and we kept with that," he says. "The idea was that you find something interesting to interact with everywhere. If you finish that and you look around, you should at least see two other options for interaction. It's no better or worse, but we don't want the feeling Kojima's going for in *Death Stranding*, of these enormous, empty spaces. We want dense, joy-filled nuggets."



Exploring the open worlds of tomorrow

"We're just there to respond to the player"

You can feel, among many designers working in open-world games in all their forms, the sense of a breath being held. Next year, *GTAVI* will arrive and most likely transform the landscape these games inhabit, just as *GTAV* did over a decade ago. And while Rockstar has the kind of budgets and creative freedom that don't exist



elsewhere, it's clear that everyone who has ever made an open world has a sense of what they'd like to see more or less of, and where they hope the future may lead.

So what does an ideal open-world game of the future look like? According to Hollow Ponds' **Ricky Haggett**, who most recently created *Flock*, it doesn't have an overwhelming amount of clutter. "The thing I don't like about open-world games is when you end up with a million icons all over the map," he says. "You just get this increasing two-dimensional list of chores that go in all directions." His hope? For games that "figure out ways to not feel like a gradually expanding chore list". He admits this stuff creeps up on players and designers alike. "You start and you have this little radius around you to find things in," he says. "Then, as you start exploring farther from that place, the radius increases, and the number of things you can find to do increases. And then that just means that the number of things you can possibly do exponentially increases. And so it can feel overwhelming."

Haggett's not convinced that designers always have the solution, though. Sometimes it's down to the player. He's just restarted *Tears Of The Kingdom*, having bounced off it originally. This time, he's going to be pickier. "I've decided all the things I'm not going to do. Oh, you're a guy with a big sign that doesn't want it to fall over? Tough shit. Let's just leave them alone. That sort of thing. It's just deliberately deciding all the things I'm not going to do, in order to artificially limit the scope of how many tasks I can add to my list." And instead? "I'll be finding the little villages and doing the chores for the people and bringing the musicians to the Fairy Fountains. Just the things that I can be bothered to engage with."

When it comes to feeling overwhelmed, Haggett is not alone. "When I think of an open-world game, I don't inherently think that's a good thing, right?" Robinson-Yu says. "I remember *Breath Of The Wild* was a big inspiration for *A Short Hike*, but before it came out, I was a little bit sceptical. You know, open-world games stretch out objectives over long periods of space." What he found in Link's adventure, though, was something inspiring: a sense of exploration. "Exploration is the key thing I think about during times when I've been hiking or when I was a kid exploring the wilderness. You just want to explore, and you want to see cool things. And I feel like some open-world games can make it feel like you're not really exploring, you're just travelling."

A sense of exploration is difficult to create in games. "Real life is so rich and interesting," Robinson-Yu says. "You can find a cool-looking rock on the beach, and that's a neat thing in real life. In your videogame, you pass over a thousand prefab rocks. There's only so much that you can do." And rewards themselves can be tricky. "I want to reward players for exploring," he says. "But

does that make [exploring] less meaningful if I'm trying to reward them? And so the rewards that I like to think of are things that are just something to do, something to see — something unique, like a vibe. So it's about finding stuff like that to put in your world."

As an example of this being done well, Robinson-Yu moves outside open worlds. "[*Dark Souls*] felt like it had depth and had richness, because there were always secret corridors to find and there are always places to go. And for me, the feeling of exploration in *Dark Souls* really got it, because there was also a struggle to get to these places. It's very easy for an RPG to give you rewards. [But] it was rewarding to explore *Dark Souls* because you're poking around corners, and you'll find a corridor, and that leads you to a whole new area."

These moments are magical, he says, because they are stumbled across, existing beyond objective markers. "For me, when you miss things in games, or you've heard about things that you've missed, I have this feeling that it's OK to have content in the game that people will never see, because some people will and some people won't. And you'll either read about it or you will stumble upon something yourself that feels rare. You'll be like, 'Oh, I could have missed this! The game designer could have easily drawn more attention to this. But they didn't, and that made finding it for me feel special'"

Hutchinson, meanwhile, thinks it's all about understanding that a map that offers freedom is very different from a map that just offers range and scale. "We definitely prioritised the openness of the map," he says of *Revenge Of The Savage Planet*. "And I think more and more games are realising that the fun is in the openness of the experience — giving the player the tools and opportunity to muck around." How much opportunity? More is always better. "It sometimes drives some of our team crazy," Hutchinson says, "but the way I see narrative in the context of a game is that we're just there to respond to the player. We're there to ask a bunch of questions and then pay off whatever they choose to do."

"And I think that's the width in the genre that we haven't explored as much. Like, do I have to kill all those guys in *Crackdown*?" He cites an idea for *Far Cry 4* that was ultimately discarded: the player explores the world, taking over outposts, and the designers toyed with then making it possible to give any recaptured outposts to Pagan Min, the game's villain. "Like, if you empathise with the villain — if you think, 'Actually, I don't think he was as bad as they said, and I don't like these people I've got into bed with?'" He laughs at the concept. "That sort of freedom of expression, of going back and changing your mind, I thought could be really, really interesting." And that focus on expressiveness, even at the expense of almost everything else? "I think that's where the fun of the whole genre might lie." ■



Alex Hutchinson,
creative director
at Raccoon Logic

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



S T A L K E R 2 : H E A R T O F C H O R N O B Y L

How GSC defied closure, the pandemic and
an invasion to realise its most ambitious project

By **ANDREI PECHALIN**

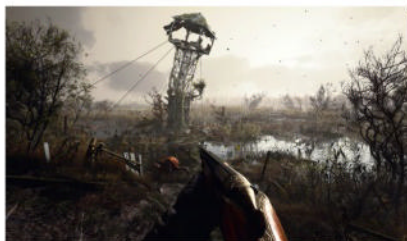
Format PC, Xbox Series
Developer/publisher GSC Game World
Origin Ukraine
Release 2024

The original *STALKER*, released in 2007, occupies a unique place in the history of game development. Despite multiple delays and technical shortcomings, it cast a long shadow over its peers. A punishing hybrid of shooter, RPG, survival and horror set in the enigmatic Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, with innovative systems – sophisticated enemy routines and persistent NPC behaviour (the so-called A-Life), dynamic lighting, and authentic ballistics model – it has been endlessly borrowed from, but never quite matched. Perhaps more importantly, it also put Ukrainian game development on the map with a splash big enough to warrant a series.

It was a difficult legacy to live up to, however. After two unnumbered followups that refined the gameplay mechanics and technical side, including the proprietary X-Ray engine, a fully fledged sequel slipped into development hell. Plagued by issues at GSC, which eventually led to the company's dissolution in 2011, the first iteration of *STALKER 2* was formally cancelled in 2012. It wasn't until 2018, after the company had been reconstituted and shipped *Cossacks 3* (GSC's other well-known franchise), that the current iteration of *STALKER 2* was announced. Yet, while it would bear no traces of the cancelled project, the most challenging days of the sequel's creation still lay ahead.

"The development of *STALKER 2* took more than seven years – we started working on it before the public announcement in 2018," explains game director and GSC CEO **Ievgen Grygorovych**. "We understood it was going to be hard. We understood what makes *STALKER* what it is – what kind of experience it delivers, how it should play and feel – whether it's about exploration, freedom, combat or survival. It was vital for us to bring back that exact formula, but in a more ambitious form – a vast open world, a new level of photorealism, a cinematic storyline. There was absolutely no need to reinvent anything, but much of that formula needed a refresh to meet the standards of a modern game."

STALKER 2 might have had the advantage of falling back on a proven formula, but marrying it up with the enormity of a seamless 64-square-kilometre exclusion zone was always



Despite the size of the Zone, the team never considered vehicles, since they could have disrupted the game's pacing

going to be an undertaking. From an artistic perspective, it involved handcrafting the entire map to a degree of fidelity unprecedented for the series. "Fun fact," says lead level designer **Artem Nor**, "one of [*STALKER 2*'s] earliest scanned concrete plates had more polygons than the entire Pripyat in *Call Of Pripyat*."

"ONE OF THE CONCRETE PLATES HAD MORE POLYGONS THAN THE ENTIRE PRIPYAT IN CALL OF PRIPYAT"

To ensure authenticity, the team drew on real reference points in and outside of Ukraine. "Thousands of photos from abandoned sites across the world serve as the primary source of inspiration," Nor continues. "It was crucial to observe and grasp how nature reclaims spaces in the absence of humans. Many well-known spots from the real [Chernobyl] Exclusion Zone have been recreated or reinterpreted in the game, although some have been altered or relocated to suit gameplay needs. Overall, most notable architectural and historical landmarks have been brought to life."

These references are backed by the team's own experiences with the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. "Chernobyl is actually very close to Kyiv," Grygorovych points out. "We've always wanted people to imagine they could

end up in the Zone themselves, just by hopping on a bus – to feel how tangible this experience truly is, right at arm's length."

The links run deeper than merely visiting the Zone, however. GSC development lead Pavlo Alieinikov's grandfather was a liquidator, one of many who sacrificed their health to contain and clean up the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster in 1986. Executive producer Mariia Grygorovych's mother was in the first half of her pregnancy when the disaster struck; she fled 300 kilometres away from Kyiv in order to save her child. These generational scars, and their broader context of Soviet imperialism, ensure that GSC's vision of the Zone is not only an atmospheric setting, but an expression of the studio's identity.

In order to realise that vision, however, the team had to find a way to translate *STALKER*'s unique aesthetic to Unreal Engine 5. Although Epic's middleware is sometimes accused of homogenising the look of modern games, Grygorovych does not concede that in the case of *STALKER 2*: "A game engine is ultimately a tool, not an out-of-the-box result. For example, *Metal Gear Solid V* was built on FOX Engine, and *Death Stranding* on Decima, yet both carry the unmistakable atmosphere of a Kojima game. X-Ray rightly deserves much praise for creating and cementing the aesthetic of *STALKER*. However, if you try – and it's only a try, as it can't be fully done – to break it down into components, such as lighting, colour palette or photogrammetry, all of that cannot only be recreated but improved."

The team are unanimous that the adoption of Epic's tools was essential to realising the game's vision. "Thanks to modern technology – primarily Unreal Engine 5 – the world of *STALKER 2* is seamless," notes lead level artist **Dzmitry Anoshka**. "It allowed us to create new terrain and locations that connect the previous ones. Locations are now more expansive, with many previously inaccessible areas opened up for exploration. The most striking example is Pripyat. Players can now explore administrative buildings, numerous apartments, parks and alleys – not to mention vast underground spaces. We've finally managed to weave these diverse areas together without compromising performance." ►

THE MAKING OF...

While the new technology opened up new possibilities, it also presented challenges. Having started work in Unreal Engine 4, GSC made the decision to transition to UE5 around the time of the pandemic. "Like many companies, the pandemic tested our ability to set up infrastructure for remote work," Grygorovych recalls. "We'd always worked in-office, so we had no clear idea what it would take to adapt."

GSC then began work with a very early, closed version of UE5, which Epic was refining even as the team were deploying it. "There were actually several engine transitions – one obvious [from UE4 to UE5], and several less so, taking into account the different versions [of UE5]," Grygorovych clarifies. "Epic Games are true professionals, but many edge cases were uncharted territory for both of us. One of the biggest hurdles was streaming a seamless game world that was also vast and complex. Later, solutions started appearing in the engine's guides, and we'd often arrive at something similar ourselves. We had to develop a lot of homegrown tools and practices for aspects where they either didn't exist or weren't sufficient. You could say we were developing the technology alongside the game."

Despite these challenges, UE5 offered the sought-after degree of photorealism, particularly useful for cutscenes. "We were able to afford over three hours of directed, nonlinear cutscenes, which change based on player choices," Grygorovych says. Like the original, *STALKER 2* offers multiple endings, but the paths toward them are paved with choices that nudge the story in different directions. Typically, these revolve around supporting one of the game's many factions at the expense of others, but, since no faction has straightforwardly good or evil motivations, the choices can feel surprisingly thorny. The addition of full voice acting and motion-captured facial animations lends drama and a cinematic flair to the Zone's politics.

The script went through several iterations that were completely scrapped before the team were convinced they had something that felt like a legitimate entry in the series, but the new choice-and-consequence mechanic reflects themes that have always been intrinsic to the games. "*STALKER* is about freedom," suggests story director **Yaroslav Kravchenko**. "Freedom is ▶

Q&A

Andrii Levkovskyi
Director of AI



What are the key differences between *STALKER*'s A-Life 1.0 and *STALKER 2*'s A-Life 2.0?

A-Life 1.0 was designed for relatively small, location-based worlds, not a true open world, and using it like in the first *STALKER* would have been impossible for numerous reasons, including performance, for example. The big open-world map without the loading screens is a dealbreaker here. We needed a new system to bring the Zone to life around the player.

What are the specific open-world challenges?

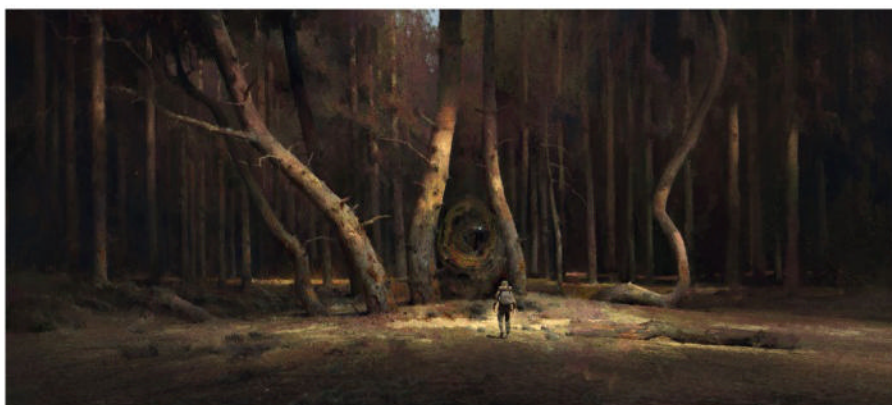
While UE5 is powerful, [the scale of the open world] created immense technical demands and required more computational and memory resources to achieve decent performance across target platforms. We had to shrink the area around the player in which A-Life 2.0 operates in its full simulation. This meant NPCs outside the player's immediate visualisation range entered a simplified 'virtual' mode, only spawning when the player approached. To manage NPC encounters and create a living Zone experience, we [also] introduced the A-Life Director, which acts as a scenario generator, simulating potential clashes from nearby lairs and spawning characters at the edge of the player's visualisation range. While it enhances players' experience by providing engaging scenarios, it's a directed approach, not the pure emergent simulation we ultimately strive for. It was a forced solution to balance the challenges of scale and performance.

We acknowledge the community's frustration over a perceived lack of transparency regarding its initial state [at launch].

Will A-Life continue to be updated, and do you have a specific end goal in sight?

We are absolutely committed to continuously improving. We're actively working on major updates that will address the core limitations originated from the open-world transition, and we're working to expand A-Life's simulation to allow for more comprehensive Zone simulation outside the player's sight. Our goal is to move from the reliance on the A-Life Director towards a more fully simulated, emergent Zone, populated by characters driven by their personal needs. It's a large undertaking, requiring significant optimisation of the game first to ensure these changes don't negatively impact performance. We're solving it by releasing smaller, impactful features more frequently, and we're dedicated to working on it until it becomes the truly emergent and immersive system we always envisioned.





1 Concept art exploring ideas for electrical anomalies appearing in the more 'urbanised' parts of *STALKER 2*'s Zone, along with the Spoil Heap in the Garbage region.

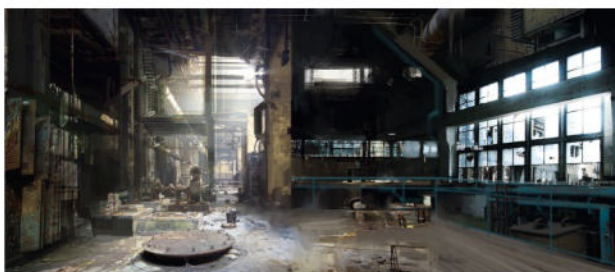
2 Clockwise from top left: Ievgen Grygorovych (game director), Artem Nor (lead level designer), Dzmitry Anoshka (lead level artist) and Yaroslav Kravchenko (story director).

3 Concepts for an armoured bandit, Korshunov, an International Perimeter Security Force soldier, Faust, scientists and Dr Kaymanov. Actor Leonid Zakharchenko was cast as Korshunov quite early during the development process, and the final version is close to his appearance.

4 Art for a factory setting, utilising the characteristic *STALKER* topics of abandonment and desolation.

5 Concept art for the scientists' bunker. A similar one is featured in the game's introductory section, and an almost identical unit is on Wild Island, near the Noontide base.

6 Artwork exploring the theme of stalkers' graves. In the original trilogy, stalkers sometimes left their comrades' loot at burial sites



THE MAKING OF...

the only way to fully experience life. Without choice, it would be impossible to let players feel that freedom. [It's also] about decisions that come at a cost. It's a kind of trade: what are you willing to give to gain something in return? Sometimes it means going too far, and other times playing it safe. Either way, the outcome may not be as clear as it first seems. [And] the tone of the narrative makes it clear that 'happy' endings are out of place here."

There is poignance to Kravchenko's emphasis on freedom, and, in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it's tempting to read into it defiance in the face of oppression. "It's important that *STALKER* is about Ukraine and the Ukrainian cultural code," Grygorovych adds. "Our awareness of our own identity has grown tenfold during this development. Now, more than ever, we want to showcase our culture."

The ongoing war spanned the latter half of *STALKER 2*'s development cycle. GSC and Microsoft's War Game documentary describes the consequences for the staff and their families – the cost in livelihoods, mental and physical trauma, and ultimately in lives. It also details the operational fallout: part of the studio relocated to Prague, to an office that needed to be set up from scratch. While some of the lessons learned during the pandemic proved invaluable here, it was still a daunting task, compounded by the need to redo voiceover and motion-capture work and by relentless cyber attacks and leaks, especially after GSC took a principled decision to scrap the Russian localisation of the game. Other members of the team chose to stay in Kyiv, with some developers volunteering on the front lines or running supplies in their hometowns.

War Game is a harrowing watch, but it's also remarkable in its demonstration of determination and leadership. In that context, while the fact that *STALKER 2* released at all is nothing short of a feat, it is perhaps not a surprising one. "The game, for us, is now an element of resistance," the documentary explains. "We are working to prove that we cannot be broken."

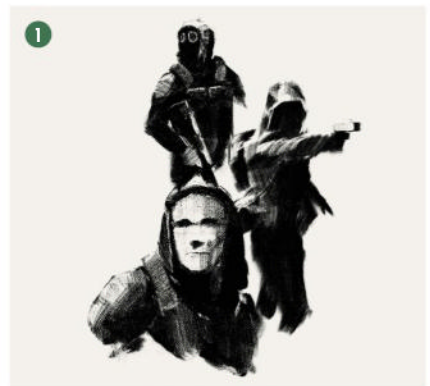
It is likewise unsurprising that GSC would want to reject the influence of Russian culture on the game's development. When asked about the Strugatsky Brothers' novel, *Roadside Picnic*, and Andrei Tarkovsky's film, *Stalker*, both of which feature some of the themes and plot devices

found in the games, Grygorovych politely explains that "while some imagery might overlap – like the conditional anomalies or bolts – it's probably already quite clear to everyone that the game *STALKER* and other sources have definitively diverged. These are fundamentally different universes, and we've genuinely put in a lot of effort over the course of four games to create our own. You could say that any intersections remain roughly at the level of Easter eggs, and hardly anything more than that."

From its troubled early history to its rocky start with a new engine, through a pandemic and years of working under military threat, *STALKER 2*'s development will be remembered as a particularly hard-won and tenacious achievement. It would be naive, though, to think that the game could emerge from such gruelling conditions unscathed. Delayed multiple times from the originally planned release date of April 2022 – which would've put it two months after Russia's invasion – shipping it in late 2024 felt like running several marathons, according to Grygorovych. Instead of putting the team through more crunch for additional polish, GSC has been hard at work patching the game since its release, improving everything from performance to A-Life 2.0, which has been unfavourably compared to the originals' A-Life 1.0 (see Q&A).

Indeed, as *STALKER 2* is buffeted by conflicting Steam reviews and fan feedback, we wonder how the studio decides what is really important to players. "The community management team reads and collects nearly all feedback," Grygorovych explains. "When dealing with such a large volume, it's usually clear what's in highest demand – like specific tweaks to the economy or rebalancing a particular mutant's attacks. With a lot of feedback, it's also easy to distinguish potential fixes from subjective preferences. Based on that, some things get adjusted. However, certain elements are left untouched for various reasons, as changing them could harm the overall perception of the game."

As the work continues, however, the studio never loses sight of how far it has come with *STALKER 2*. "We have objective numbers: sales of over a million copies in the first three days and six million players across all platforms," says Grygorovych. "We feel boundless gratitude, pride – in productive, therapeutic amounts – and the strongest motivation to keep working." ■





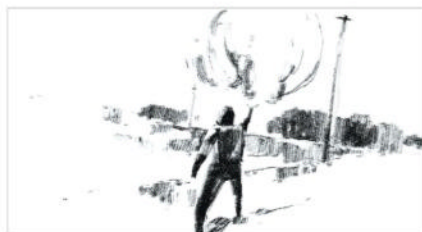
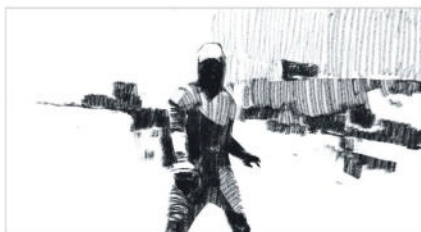
1 A sketch of the character-based concept for posters, connecting different characters and factions.

2 "We were able to keep the game challenging and harsh," Grygorovych notes. "From the perspective of appealing to the widest possible audience, this might sound like a questionable move, [but] there are plenty of people eager for this specific experience."

3 The in-game mosaics are a distinctive part of Ukrainian culture and reflect an authentic style. This mosaic was created from scratch but inspired by real mosaics – some elements were reimaged from existing ones, while others were entirely original additions.

4 During development, numerous variations were devised for how hub locations might look. This concept art was also used for the opening of a *STALKER*-themed supermarket in Kyiv and can be seen in-store.

5 Grygorovych's list of themes for the game includes "confrontation between man and his environment", "loneliness, the search for closeness and connection", and the "anomalous ocean [of the Zone]"





STUDIO PROFILE

DIGITAL ECLIPSE

The California company
with an expert eye for
repackaging game history

By LEWIS PACKWOOD



Founded 1992

Employees 24

Key staff Mike Mika, Stephen Frost, Chris Kohler, Dan Amrich

URL www.digitaleclipse.com

Selected softography Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration, Tetris Forever, Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story, The Making Of Karateka

Current projects MK: Legacy Kollection + TBA

When it was founded in 1992, Digital Eclipse was nothing like the firm it is today. "It was a Macintosh productivity software company," explains **Mike Mika**, who joined in 1997 and now leads the studio. "Its biggest claim to fame was writing a piece of software to allow you to compress a Macintosh hard drive."

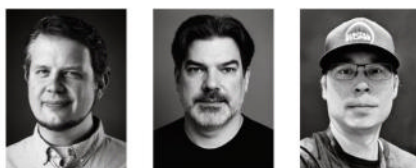
But the firm swiftly changed course to focus on emulation – a niche area of interest in the early 1990s. At that time, home versions of arcade games tended to be idiosyncratic interpretations, but Digital Eclipse was able to put out pixel-perfect ports of *Joust*, *Robotron: 2084* and *Defender* for Apple's Mac in 1994, setting the company on a trajectory it maintains to this day: breathing life back into vintage games.

In parallel, for a long time the studio maintained a profitable line of licensed games and conversion work on handhelds including Game Boy Color. This is how Mika got involved, initially as a contractor, after he taught himself how to make Game Boy titles as a hobby. "I was moonlighting as a Game Boy developer at night and writing for Next Generation magazine, **Edge's** sister magazine, during the day," he recalls. "That was a very brutal time." After shipping the Game Boy Color version of *NFL Blitz* in 1998, he joined Digital Eclipse full-time.

Mika says that the 8bit Game Boy architecture made Digital Eclipse a "haven for people who grew up making games on the Commodore 64 or Spectrum". That said, it was also something of a relentless production line for licensed titles. "Our luxury timescale back then was six to eight months," he recalls, although projects typically had shorter deadlines: GBC *Klax* was rushed out in just eight weeks, with Mika working around the clock.

But the job also offered a surprising amount of freedom, since handheld games would often go under the radar of publishers. "We were doing a Lilo & Stitch game for Game Boy Advance," Mika remembers, "and we loved *Metal Slug*, so we made a *Metal Slug*-style game. And no one at Disney was really paying attention to it." The Disney execs only latched onto the particularly gun-heavy gameplay when they had to present the game to then-CEO Michael Eisner (fortunately, he thought the game was "incredible", Mika recalls).

It was a similar story for GBA and DS game *Charlotte's Web* in 2006, which was internally called *Pig Of Persia* for the way it paid homage to Jordan Mechner's classic series. "We didn't



Digital Eclipse's Chris Kohler (editorial director), Mike Mika (head of studio) and Stephen Frost (head of production)

look at it as like an assembly line," Mika says, "as much as like having the opportunity to make all these games that we always thought we would make, with very little adult supervision."

By the time *Charlotte's Web* launched, Digital Eclipse had merged with ImaginEngine to form Backbone Entertainment, with studios renamed Backbone Emeryville and Backbone Vancouver. Later, Digital Eclipse co-founder Andrew Ayre took several employees with him to form a new studio, Other Ocean Interactive, under the parent company Other Ocean Group; meanwhile, Backbone Vancouver closed in 2009, followed by Backbone Emeryville in 2012. Then, in 2015, Other Ocean Group acquired the Digital

It turns out people really *did* care about this stuff, so the company has delved even deeper into it over the years, to the point where the extra content is now the focus. *Atari 50: The Anniversary Collection* in 2022 was the first of this new breed of interactive documentary, folding in video interviews and written information to provide the necessary context to understand Atari's gaming history. However, work on *The Making Of Karateka* came first, even though it wouldn't launch until 2023.

Chris Kohler, who joined Digital Eclipse as editorial director in 2020 after spending years writing about games for publications such as *Wired*, explains that the *Karateka* project began with a more traditional split between a game

SINCE MECHNER OWNS KARATEKA, KOHLER SAYS IT WAS EASY TO GAIN HIS APPROVAL TO TRY "SOMETHING CRAZY"

Eclipse name, and Ayre relaunched the studio alongside Mika and Frank Cifaldi (who later left to create the Video Game History Foundation).

"It was very much the old Digital Eclipse all over again," Mika says of the company's reboot. This time, though, the focus was entirely on lovingly curated re-releases of classic games, beginning with *Mega Man Legacy Collection* in 2015, followed by *The Disney Afternoon Collection* in 2017, then *Street Fighter* and SNK 40th anniversary collections in 2018.

Mika says the philosophy of the relaunched company was to "go deep," packing in extra content that provides context on how classic titles were made, rather than simply bundling some old games together and calling it a day. "Maybe people care about this stuff," he remembers thinking, before agreeing to "take that gamble". Hence the inclusion of an interactive timeline in the *Street Fighter* collection, as well as a museum that showcases concept art, pitch documents and character sprites and profiles.

section and museum-based bonus content. However, Jordan Mechner's meticulousness in saving all of the journals, builds and art relating to his 1984 game – and in particular dating everything – led to a different idea.

"I realised that the entries in the journals connect to the cut sprites and the design sketches, because those are dated, and it's like, oh, we have to create something here that brings that all together," Kohler remembers. "We can really tell the whole story on a chronological timeline." This prompted the birth of the interactive documentary concept. Since Mechner owns *Karateka* outright rather than it being the property of a publisher, Kohler says it was easy to gain his approval to try "something crazy".

In the meantime, Atari came knocking in search of a way of celebrating its 50th anniversary that wasn't simply another game collection. So Digital Eclipse pivoted its in-development interactive documentary idea to Atari games – although now it had a hard deadline to meet for the anniversary. "We did ▶

STUDIO PROFILE



Fittingly, Digital Eclipse's office in Emeryville, California, is something of an Aladdin's cave of retro delights, featuring a lineup of vintage arcade cabinets, which get plenty of use, and a 1970s Commodore PET machine, whose entertainment value hasn't proved quite as durable

tons and tons of iterations and fixes, and really nailed down how those timeline structures and everything were going to work," Kohler says. In turn, this led to a template that could be applied to later games in what is known as the Gold Master Series, which now includes *Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story*, *Tetris Forever* and the forthcoming *Mortal Kombat: Legacy Kollektion*.

Some have been easier to make than others. "Llamasoft was a little bit more of a challenge," Kohler says, "because if Jordan Mechner is Mr I'm Going To Write Down Every Piece of Game Design On Paper And Meticulously Date It, Jeff Minter is like, 'I'm going to go into a room with an infinite supply of tea and Diet Coca-Cola, and I'm going to just sit down, and then a week later I'm going to be done with my latest videogame'. And there's no early versions, and there's no design documents or anything like that." Instead, Kohler incorporated things such as Minter's school notebooks and family photos, as well as ads and articles from old game magazines, along with video interviews.

Head of production **Stephen Frost** notes that Digital Eclipse is packed with people who used to work in videogame media: his background includes US PlayStation magazine PSM, while business development chief Tom Russo worked on Next Generation. "It's built on the foundation of our past experience of working in the game press and trying to find out the interesting story that will get people excited," he says.

Kohler puts it more succinctly. "Digital Eclipse is a retirement home for videogame journalists who have aged out," he laughs. But that collective nose for a good story has been invaluable for finding the conflict and excitement in the potentially dry material of game development. Kohler asked questions while working on *The Making Of Karateka*: "Where does Jordan Mechner fail? Why does he fail?"

And then how does he use that failure to pull the nose up and ultimately succeed?"

In terms of the kinds of projects Digital Eclipse takes on, Mika says there's a balance between "strategic" products such as *Karateka* and *Llamasoft* that "push the brand forward" and allow the studio to do "crazier things", and larger IP such as *Tetris* and *Mortal Kombat* that can provide more guaranteed returns. Content editor **Dan Amrich** likens it to the Criterion Collection, which includes blockbuster films such as *Wall-E* along with deeper cuts such as *Repo Man*. "We can take something like *Karateka* and say, 'Look, this is brilliant, but history has not given it the

concludes, and the next step is to expand to a larger audience. "We're challenging ourselves, project to project, and we're very excited about some of the stuff that's coming up, because we're pushing some of the concepts we've established, and we're also trying some really new things."

There are limits to what the company can do with its technology, however. The Gold Master games use the firm's in-house Eclipse Engine, but it struggles to run anything from the PS2 generation onwards owing to the processing power needed to run an emulator on top of the game itself. For newer games, Frost says, "We have to approach it from the standpoint of trying to port it instead of emulating it."

"WE'RE PUSHING SOME OF THE CONCEPTS WE'VE ESTABLISHED, AND WE'RE ALSO TRYING SOME REALLY NEW THINGS"

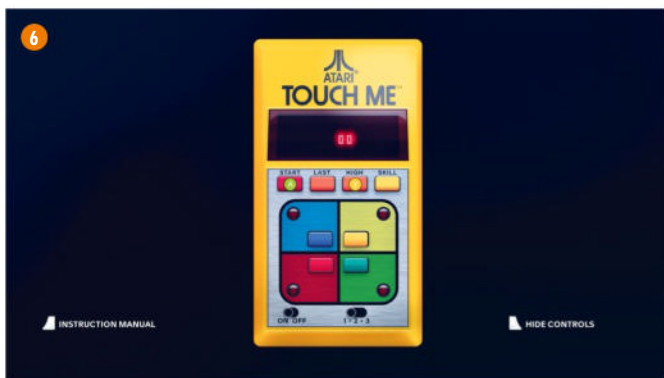
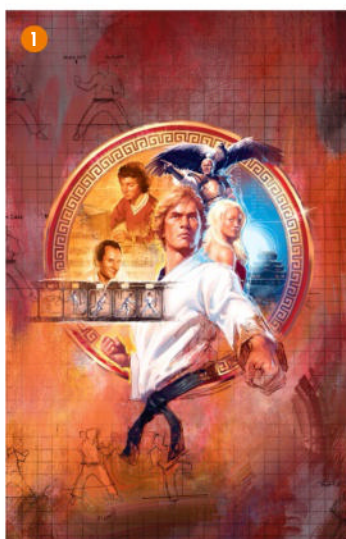
respect that it deserves'," he says, while more mainstream titles can garner audience attention as well as being elevated and respected in their own right. "'From the people that brought you *Power Rangers*, here's *Karateka*!'"

Mika elaborates on this dichotomy, saying that whereas the Gold Master Series is an attempt to improve on the simple retro collections put out by the original incarnation of Digital Eclipse, the studio's push with new titles such as 2024's *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: Rita's Rewind* is a reflection of the company's history with licensed IP and a wish to innovate in that space too. "We're starting to dabble with that," he says. "And if you go down our history, you'll probably see a lot of what we're thinking about."

Games such as *Rita's Rewind* have "proven the thesis" of the relaunched Digital Eclipse, Mika

This is where Atari's purchase of the company in 2023 could help, since Digital Eclipse is now in the same group as Nightdive Studios, which has proven itself as something of a master with porting older games to modern platforms. Mika says that Nightdive has already helped to get online play working for *Rita's Rewind*, and both companies have shared resources. "They're an incredible group to be under Atari with, and we speak the same language."

Frost adds that they talk to Nightdive "on a regular basis", and he anticipates even closer collaboration. "As we start to trend into the 3D space of the later platforms, I think you're going to inherently and organically see a lot more cross-pollination between our two groups," he says. "I can imagine in the future some potential projects where we're both working together." ■



- 1 Digital Eclipse began its interactive documentary approach with *The Making Of Karateka*, although *Atari 50* beat it to launch.
- 2 *Tetris Forever* goes deep into history, to the point of recreating the original Elektronika 60 version.
- 3 Digital Eclipse's modern remakes include *Wizardry: Proving Grounds Of The Mad Overlord*, which features the original Apple II game running in the corner of the screen.
- 4 *Ancipital* is one of many C64 games running under emulation in *Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story*.
- 5 Original Digital Eclipse creation *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: Rita's Rewind* was released in 2024.
- 6 *Atari 50's* virtual recreation of the handheld *Touch Me*, from 1978

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

NEAR MISSES

Fast Fusion Switch 2

With *Mario Kart World* already dominating our driving time, it's a real shame that Switch 2's other notable exclusive launch title was also a racing game. *Fast Fusion* does offer a change of pace in the literal sense, though, with its craft hurtling at ungodly speeds, while its rechargeable boost meter adds tactical dimensions to your racing lines. More than anything, though, it triggers a hankering for a game of *Wipeout* or *F-Zero*. Borrowing elements from both, it's half as cool as one, not as finely tuned as the other, and visually it lacks the extra punch that brand-new hardware deserves.



Irem Collection Volume 3

PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series

We don't normally put retro collections here, but Irem has us at 'Heli'. That's *Mr Heli* to you (or *Battle Chopper* according to his bland westernisation), one of Irem's most enduring '80s shooters outside of *R-Type* thanks to its rotund 'copter man and mix of mining and fighting. He's supported here by a pair of old favourites: the broomstick-based *Mystic Riders* and *Dragon Breed*, notable for giving you control of a screen-dominating, invincible beast, ridden by a fragile human. Protecting the latter is a tough task, so we're grateful for an instant-rewind feature.



Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content



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Noses to the grindstone

We've had to put the hours in this month. You don't get far in *Death Stranding 2*, for one, if you aren't prepared to graft, quads burning as you trudge up a 45-degree slope, weighed down by anything from medical supplies to a poorly kangaroo. Of course, as in its predecessor, this effort in Kojima Productions' latest is fused with irony, as it turns expectations of open-world adventures on their head. The grind isn't the gateway to the game here – it is the game itself.

Elsewhere, in an abundance of multiplayer offerings, we encounter more conventional grinds, and find that developers are still struggling to balance staying power with consistently interesting things to do. *Dune: Awakening* has us scrapping in the dirt for a few dozen hours before it starts to soar, which doesn't feel like the best use of our time. Meanwhile, in *FBC: Firebreak*, we're forced to repeat missions until we can unlock the more entertaining battle tools.

It's easy to conclude that grind is the enemy of enjoyment – can't games just be entertaining throughout? When the success of an online game is measured in years, though, that's easier said than done. With *Rematch*, for example, there's immediate fun to be had, and it's good to see Sloclap committing to a level playing field, eschewing character progression systems. But can its knockabout brand of football sustain interest over many seasons? It feels as though it may need *something* else – as a format, it appears less flexible than the comparable *Rocket League*, or *Mario Kart World*. Speaking of which, Nintendo probably has got it right: with solid foundations in place, there's scope to add dozens more tracks over time.

Even so, with all of these time commitments, we could have done with something more finite and focused to cleanse the palate. Unfortunately, while *MindsEye* promised exactly that, the end result turns out to be laborious.



Death Stranding 2: On The Beach

To help us recall the rhythm of Kojima Productions' unique debut, we're asked to walk a mile — or thereabouts — in its protagonist's shoes. Eleven months after reconnecting a fractured USA, Sam Porter Bridges is in hiding with Lou, the government-owned pod-baby he's now secretly adopted. As the game begins, Sam gazes out over a remote peak with Lou strapped to his chest; our task is simply to guide them home. We begin to trot down bumpy slopes, learning once again to watch our step, hold the triggers to maintain balance, and wield the left stick with care.

It's a handy recap, and it's pleasing to be handed control before the game's star-studded cabaret of a story lurches to life. But if *Death Stranding 2* is again about walking, it's not long before Kojima and co start to run. As a sequel, you could call this iterative, but the success of the original grants the developers momentum and a confidence to remove the brakes altogether. What was an odd, complex, dazzling fiction becomes even more so. The gamification of getting from A to B gains further layers, stacking up like the containers Sam takes on his more arduous deliveries. True, there are *too many* ideas vying for space here, not all of them great ones, but you have to admire the audacity of the operation, how it sucks so many disparate elements into a single orbit.

Sam — still bearing the likeness and voice of Norman Reedus — is coaxed out from seclusion by Fragile (Léa Seydoux), who now runs a company called Drawbridge and wants to continue to link up pockets of survivors in the post-apocalypse. We leave Lou under her care to travel down to Mexico, marching from one settlement to the next, attaching each to the Chiral network — a technological lifeline in a world littered with 'BTs', the malicious souls of the dead. Later, thanks to a new phenomenon known as a 'Plate Gate' — a kind of intercontinental warp portal — we take our cause to Australia, where the bulk of this grand tour takes place.

It doesn't take long for the unorthodox rules to sink in again. On a mission to bridge gaps, our journeys once again bridge that between walking sim and action adventure. In the early stages, you move on foot, bulked out with cargo, a Deliveroo rider without a bike. You follow your route plan, an AR line superimposed on the world as if you were inside a Google map. But the terrain matters, and you need to watch it more closely than games usually demand. How much of an obstacle is that hill? Can you sidle down that steep slope without using your last climbing rope? Is it best to cross the river here or detour farther upstream? With the weight and condition of your cargo to consider, such calculations only become muddier. That neat route you plotted becomes a trend-line against the realities of navigation.

If it's sedate, the return of the original's social interactions adds spice. It's impossible not to applaud a

Developer Kojima Productions
Publisher SIE
Format PS5
Release Out now

You have to admire the audacity of the operation, how it sucks so many disparate elements into a single orbit

bridge or climbing rope placed thoughtfully by another player, and we return the favour where we can. And, as the game reintroduces vehicles, we get caught up once more in bringing materials to auto-paver machines to 3D-print roads. In one satisfying case, we contribute to a stretch that bisects an enemy stronghold, making it easy to race through unscathed. There are monorails to build now as well, one of many kinds of fast travel — all with certain limitations — once your network grows. As such structures appear, we aren't even too perturbed when a mission contrives to send us back whence we came. It's a chance to see how regions have developed since you brought them online and enjoy shortcuts sprinkled about by altruistic engineers.

If travel is the priority, though, combat is more prominent this time. True, hours may still pass with no cause to raise a weapon, and you may go around (or speed through) some enemy camps, but forced stealth/action situations are more full-blooded as well as numerous. Fortunately, many are enjoyable. Gear management naturally bleeds into stealth tactics: go too toolled up into enemy territory and it may work against you — a stack of equipment is visible when hiding in long grass, for instance. (Where we used to hide in boxes in Kojima games, now they might give us away.) In battle, meanwhile, our arsenal grows until we're throwing boxes of rockets and deploying exploding robot dogs, and beneath all the game's eclectic systems there's an accomplished tactical cover shooter. Sequences that pit you against a mysterious soldier and his skeletal squad, for example, are far stronger than the trench-based equivalents from the first game.

Then again, with combat elevated, we're forced to face an awkward truth. This is a game whose developers have gone to great lengths to subvert open-world norms, offering a core aim of bringing people together in contrast to resolution through conflict. And yet for long stretches, the action is more compelling than the main event. The mounting pile of brigand and boss battles feels like a thematic compromise, and *Death Stranding 2* is at its best when it's most like *Metal Gear Solid V*. The fact that you still don't technically kill anyone doesn't wash as justification. Sure, your weapons contain 'non-lethal' ammo, but you're still lining up headshots and lobbing grenades, enacting the usual violence.

Perhaps this is a tacit admission that, no matter how much texture is injected into making deliveries, that alone can't sustain a game of 40+ hours. Indeed, by the mid-point, the fetching and carrying is wearing as thin as Sam's shoe leather. Sure, there's plenty to appreciate about the change of scenery in Australia. The environments are rockier, greener, hotter, colder. The volatile weather conditions, from flooding rivers to sandstorms and searing sunshine, produce an open





ABOVE There are side deliveries and requests to fulfil if you have time, rewarding you with 'likes' from clients and more gadgets to play with. When there are so many main jobs, though, it's hard to feel compelled



TOP The beauty of the game's many environments is often elevated by music. Woodkid is the primary artist this time, while Low Roar's dreamy ballads return.
MAIN Tar is frequently a concern during boss encounters, slowing you down. One new trick sees you summon a monster of your own.
RIGHT Animals can now be caught in containers and sent to a sanctuary. Sadly, on one occasion, we accidentally run over a wombat

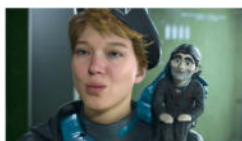




world infused with emotion — happy to accommodate us one minute, furious the next. But there are only so many times you can emerge from elemental assaults and feel triumphant as a battered Sam staggers to his destination. Likewise, there are only so many times you can skip the routine animations that bookend missions before wishing they weren't there to be skipped at all.

The game is hurt by the fact it's a sequel and we've seen so much of this before. It's no longer as fascinating to watch Reedus enjoy a drink or take a shower, nor to see many of the same gadgets return in almost the same order as before. We're grateful when a new pickup truck variant inevitably unlocks, as it enables us to cut a few corners. It's not designed for the toughest terrain, but a little brute-forcing over rocks and past BTs often still saves time. In missions that ask us to keep our cargo cool or flat, we throw the stuff in the boot accepting that it may not arrive in perfect condition, ignoring a slower, steadier approach.

Indeed, while there's plenty you *can* engage with, there are too many makeweight missions where it hardly seems worthwhile. *Death Stranding 2* is often easygoing, yet it's when you have to plan carefully or improvise ingeniously to escape a pickle that it shines. A mission to rescue an injured kangaroo from a bush fire stands out, for instance, as you deploy a tar cannon to clear temporary paths through the inferno. New gadgets, or changes to old ones, can also throw up interesting tactical decisions. The way timefall shelters not only protect you from damaging rain but also now repel BTs makes them useful in infested areas, while a zippy amphibious surfboard is powered by the Chiral network, so as much as it speeds up travel, you have to factor in dragging it through unconnected zones.



MOBILE HOME

With secretive private funding behind Drawbridge, you're offered the luxury of the DHV Magellan, a ship to accompany you on your journey. This hefty vessel travels through the supernatural tar streams that work their way into the world in this reality, which in practice means it can pop up anywhere on the Chiral network. As such, once you arrive at a new destination, it will follow, offering a constant place of rest and storage for gear and vehicles. You can use it to hop quickly back to places you've visited (except when the plot dictates otherwise). And it's here that you'll get to know many of the key characters, who've taken up residence. Among some familiar faces, the crew includes pilot Tarman (George Miller), the cheerful Rainy (Shioli Kutsuna), and the unnerving Tomorrow (Elle Fanning).

Sam's stamina and blood levels remain a primary concern. A glug of water or a rest will top up the latter if you're flagging, while blood bags will ensure that getting shot isn't fatal — within reason, of course

In fact, once you've trundled along the west and north coasts of Oz, the game does get a second wind. The country's vast central mountain is a genuinely worthy adversary — a place where you might actually run out of stamina, where a loss of grip can send you tumbling backwards, and a vehicle may simply refuse to cooperate. Following a line to your destination becomes a trial when you're blinded by a blizzard and knee-deep in snow. Sam's exhaustion is palpable, as are the stakes.

Beyond such challenges, the game ends with the spectacular — a conclusion filled with imagery as incredible for its creativity as its technical wizardry. It's visually stunning throughout, in fact — whether the camera is lingering on Sam's face or a similarly rugged landscape. But it also doesn't know when to quit — prime antagonist Higgs puts on a show for the finale, not least due to Troy Baker's fizzing performance, but its duration will likely test anyone's patience.

It couldn't be more different from that first walk with Lou, and despite all the money and talent on the screen, it's hard to escape the notion that Kojima Productions should have done more to nurture the unique, quiet details — making even more of the undulations of scenery, the degradation of cargo in the rain. Still, there is plenty to celebrate here, not least that an action-adventure game with a primary focus on logistics can work at all, even if it requires support from the ensemble. This is a grand, unwieldy behemoth of a sequel, buckling under the weight of its features and bombast. In lacking a sense of direction, though, it sometimes delivers in unexpected ways.

Post Script

Sublime or ridiculous? Why not both?

The usual critical debate around Hideo Kojima will only be further fuelled by *Death Stranding 2*. If his game design credentials are widely recognised, as a writer and director he's always been harder to evaluate, and that's not about to change. For some he's a genius, for others a hack. But, like the stories he writes, the reality is surely more complex.

What do we think, for example, about the characters in *Death Stranding 2* with bluntly descriptive names? Sam Porter Bridges is, of course, a porter who builds bridges. The first game's Deadman and Heartman are now joined by Tarman, who pilots the Magellan through tar streams, and Dollman, a guide character in the classic *Zelda* style who takes the form of a talking doll. Is this simply lacklustre writing? Perhaps. But then the game's often-tortured prose is equally entangled in bright ideas, clever jokes, layered meanings and self-awareness. Kojima's worlds never let us escape the sense that there's method to the madness.

In some cases the aim may be provocation. In an early plot dump delivered by Deadman — at that stage the longest of its kind in the story — we watch Guillermo del Toro's character perform tricks with a baby toy as he talks, as if jangling a set of keys for the less attentive. The scene is then interrupted by a boss battle, before he picks up where he left off. This is surely a playful jab at those who've criticised Kojima for over-indulging his cinematic pretensions. 'Here, have a fight', it says. 'Happy now?'

Or, with a more elevated brow, might we suggest there's a touch of Berthold Brecht's epic theatre here? Brecht wrote plays that drew attention to the artifice of their fiction so audiences wouldn't suspend their disbelief but would instead consider the political themes of the work in relation to reality. He was always, then, in conversation with the audience, and there's no doubt that Kojima often talks right at us in his games. So while the names and the premise and plot developments in *Death Stranding 2* can be absurd, there's enough to suggest that their writer is trying to stop us becoming absorbed so we instead consider the themes behind the content and how formal etiquette can be ignored. If further evidence is needed, in one late scene, after a character arrives to introduce a nonsense *deus ex machina*, his adversary echoes our thoughts: 'You can't possibly be serious!'

There's something to be said about the game's strange casting too. With Nicolas Winding-Refn, Guillermo del Toro and now George Miller, it's easy to conclude that Kojima has invited some of his favourite directors along just for fun (or to bathe in their reflected glory). Yet he uses the limited range of these stand-in actors to good effect, their slightly stilted delivery

(much of it exposition) increasing the sense of the uncanny in the story. Meanwhile, professional actors such as Léa Seydoux and Norman Reedus operate more conventionally, behind the fourth wall, emotionally engaging in the events that unfold. And then Troy Baker, the veteran game actor, is left to let rip as the psychopathic Higgs, munching up the virtual scenery, ensuring no one will upstage him on his turf. The combined effect is extremely clever.

Despite the hidden depths, though, Kojima still seems to be juggling too many balls for his (and our) own good. The plot really is a set of strands, some of which will only meet and mesh in the most contrived circumstances (and within those bloated bouts of exposition). The subplot featuring the mystery man played by Luca Marinelli, for example, is a needless replacement for Mads Mikkelsen's presence in the first game. It's introduced too late to make a mark and then largely resolves itself after a few set-piece battles. With flashbacks then filling in the gaps, it's an ill-fitting, stapled-on dose of family drama whose connection to Sam we could do without.

As for the game's themes, rather than ask what it's all about, it may be easier to ask what *isn't* it about. *Death Stranding 2*'s tagline, 'Should we have connected?', flickers with all kinds of real-world significance. At various points it could refer to the Internet and social media, COVID-19, the encroachment of AI, state versus private-sector investment, immigration, environmental degradation, tiered societies, playing god with science — in short, a catch-all question for almost all of current civilisation's hot-topic issues, not to mention the human condition more generally. By dipping a toe into so many pools, it avoids being too cleanly didactic. And if it offers answers, they are broad and imperfect ones, leaving the details to those who might actually try to keep the world afloat. Yet by the same token it feels scattershot and vague, never fully grappling with the many and varied problems it identifies.

Between all that, you'll find some old-fashioned fan service in the form of references to the beloved *Metal Gear Solid* series, and the overall result is this great swirl of spectacle and celebrity, politics, meta-narrative, in-jokes and uneven pacing. But if sometimes Kojima takes us down paths that lead nowhere of note, invariably norms are being subverted in the process, and with that *Death Stranding 2* gives us plenty to ponder: about the nature of game craft, narrative technique and even society, as well as the rules of character naming. And somehow, from all that mess, it retrieves something touching and intimate with which to finish the story. That requires some skill, at least. ■

As for the game's themes, rather than ask what it's all about, it may be easier to ask what *isn't* it about



Mario Kart World

Has the Mushroom Kingdom ever made sense as a coherent world? Certainly that's never been the priority of Nintendo's designers over the previous decades, laying its foundations over various series, genres and generations. So it's a joyous surprise to drive from one end of *World's* incarnation and discover how natural it all feels to have this place, these places, presented as a single landmass.

Starting out from Peach's castle and heading north, the pastoral flats begin to sprout rocky terrain and then signs of industry: pylons, railways, green-pipe bridges. By the time we've crossed the river, the skies have begun to darken with clouds of volcanic ash — a literal foreshadowing of the lava colossus of Bowser that looms, spitting fireballs, over *his* castle. Equally, we might have wandered east, past the Edo shrines of Cheep Cheep Falls and Donkey Kong's ski resort — a nod, presumably, to *Tropical Freeze* — through the surf to land at the gargantuan shipwreck where Wario seems to have installed himself as a pirate king.

Whatever route we take, we don't notice any seams between one biome (which feels like a strange word to apply to a Mario game) and the next. It's tempting to draw parallels with *Forza Horizon*, where you can motor from the Lake District onto Edinburgh high streets via the Uffington White Horse without any sense of geographic dissonance, but that comparison might mislead on the role this game's open world serves.

At this point, it's worth noting how you access *Mario Kart World's* Free Roam Mode. The start menu is dominated by big chunky buttons offering singleplayer and a variety of multiplayer options (local, online, wireless play), each leading on to the usual offerings: Grand Prix, Versus, Battle, and so on. You'd be forgiven for missing the prompt, tucked in the bottom-right corner, to tap the pause button. This sets up an excellent presentational flourish, as the screensaver-style video playing in the background is revealed to be live footage, and you're dropped into the driving seat to take over. But it also speaks to the marginal nature of Free Roam.

Where *World's* reveal — and, indeed, its title — might have implied something in the mould of *Forza Horizon*, you might be better imagining *Burnout's* Paradise Island, minus the races, or *Breath Of The Wild's* Hyrule if it were all Korok Seeds. Your main goal is to collect Peach Medallions and drive over question-mark panels, found by exploring off-road and occasionally using the new (and rather tricky) charge-hop manoeuvre to reach an elevated spot that initially seemed impossible.

Slightly more robust are Free Roam's P-Switch challenges, which transform a small patch of the world in some way. Generally, this means the addition of eight blue coins or a series of gates, but the best examples delve deep into *World's* toybox to augment these basic

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

You might find yourself racing a steam train, or gliding between the wings of a pterodactyl, or taking control of an 18-wheeler



WORLD WARDROBE
Mario Kart World's roster is enormous, but you don't get to 50 characters without including a few enemies. Konkdo, Coin Coffe and Chargin' Chuck are among the barrel scrapings available, though first you'll need another player to hit you with the Kamek item's transmogrifying spell. Fortunately, you have more agency with what really matters: costume changes. Driving through roadside takeaways to pick up a food bag rewards you with a speed boost and, potentially, a thematically relevant outfit. If you're seeking a particular costume, it's a case of figuring out which regions might serve that dish: to dress Mario in a kimono, for example, grab some sushi from Cheep Cheep Falls. Just try not to meet the eyes of the fish driving a kart.

time-trial challenges. You might find yourself racing a steam train, or gliding between the wings of a pterodactyl, or taking control of an 18-wheeler that pushes every other vehicle off the road.

Spectacle aside, these challenges are decent but unexceptional, with little reward for completing them. None of which stops us ticking them off. In part, this is led by a canine instinct: spotting a peloton of Chargin' Chucks, or a Super Star dropping from the sky and bouncing across the landscape, it's all but irresistible to chase them. It's also testament to just how pleasurable *World's* driving model is, even outside of a competitive context. The truth is, though, that Free Roam feels like it was designed to occupy you while waiting for a friend to join your online session (it doubles as an online lobby, minus the P-blocks). Meanwhile, the main event is the same as it's always been in *Mario Kart*: races.

These take place on roped-off partitions of the wider world, generally eschewing lap-based circuits of a track in favour of extended rallies that take in a single loop before going cross-country. (It is possible to play traditional lap-based races, but only by fiddling with Versus mode's settings.) This results in more lengthy straights than we expect from *Mario Kart*, and prohibits high-concept showstopper tracks — it's notable that the exception to these rules, Rainbow Road, is separated from the rest of the open world so it can't be reached in Free Roam or linked into any between-track rallies. But it's held back so tantalisingly, and revealed with such ceremony, that we can't be too disappointed about this.

Back on the ground, even the straightest stretches are enlivened by the quantity of alternate routes, which often require use of the hop to grind rails and ride along walls. However, it isn't always clear which shortcuts are legal, which means that a path discovered in Free Roam might result in Lakitu chasing you down if attempted during a Grand Prix. These bypasses are necessary thanks to the number of racers on the track — doubling the previous maximum to 24 — and plenty of other entities besides, most of which double as obstacle and opportunity. The newly introduced Signal Bugs swing their Slinky-like legs to create temporary boost gates, but you don't want to risk getting trodden on. It's a similar situation with the dinosaurs that stomp through *World's* answer to Jurassic Park, but lower their necks to provide makeshift ramps and grind rails.

And then there are bystanders. Yoshis running drive-thru takeaways, coachfuls of Toad tourists, an occasional Shy Guy hitchhiker staggering under the weight of their rucksack — a citizenry rarely seen in this world of rulers, heroes and champions. Their presence is one of many details that makes not only *Mario Kart* but the entire Mushroom Kingdom feel more alive. As an open-world game, it might be too light for some, but *World* earns the suffix in other entertaining ways.



ABOVE Mooching around the open world between online races, you can communicate via a handful of pre-written messages. You'll see "I'll take a picture!" often, prompting a group of strangers to gather for a quick selfie

TOP Fine altitudinal control when gliding is core to many P-Block challenges in Free Roam – and our lack of it proves responsible for almost every one of our restarts.

ABOVE Just about every part of *World* can be played splitscreen (with a cap of two players for online and wireless modes), with the exception of Free Roam. As ever, *Mario Kart* is at its best when you're sharing a sofa.

RIGHT The Mega Mushroom makes its return after being absent from *MK8*, as does the Cape Feather (only found in *MK8*'s Battle Mode)





Being at the head of the pack, even in the final stretch, doesn't guarantee you'll be safe from elimination in Knockout Tour

Post Script

Knockout Tour's drive to survive is a game-changing delight

We tend to think of each new *Mario Kart* as an experiment, tweaking the variables in some new way. Motion controls, two-wheelers, dual drivers, gliders, anti-grav tracks: the most successful of these stick around, to become a permanent part of the formula. But laid out like that, don't they seem like such small deviations? No wonder *8 Deluxe* was able to package up practically every track from the series' history.

We don't point this out to complain but rather to emphasise how, when the essentials are carved into our synapses by repetition, even a minor change is felt keenly. Ridiculous as this might seem, it takes us a while to get over the fact that solo shells now orbit your kart without requiring you to hold down the trigger, increasing the likelihood that they'll be driven into. It feels instinctively unfair that Lakitu now confiscates all carried items along with the usual coin tax for a rescue. And even after dozens of hours we've yet to *entirely* master that hop manoeuvre, let alone the new 180° turn and rewind function, because they all have to compete with decades of established muscle memory. It's a miracle, then, that *World's* biggest experiment manages to feel so immediately natural.

Knockout Tour doesn't make any changes to *Mario Kart's* moment-to-moment play, at

least not beyond those already mentioned. Instead, its tweaking is structural: how races are joined up, and what victory means. Each Tour is a six-leg marathon spanning almost the entire map, merely touching each track before hurtling on to the next. It begins with a full 24 racers jostling for place, before whittling the number down at each checkpoint – to the top 20, then 16, 12, eight, four.

This results in some incredibly hectic photo finishes, potentially five times in the same race. The number of players on the track, especially early on, combined with the inherently unpredictable nature of *Mario Kart* mean that it's easy to go from front of the pack to relegation just yards short of the finish line. (It's while cooling down after such incidents that we find ourselves most appreciative of Free Roam's sedate pootling.)

Perhaps even more fundamentally, it also shifts the emphasis from chasing first place – at least until the final four – to *not coming last*. That in turn addresses a couple of underlying weaknesses that, in retrospect, have always existed in *Mario Kart*. One: that pickups hindering your rivals (green and red shells, bananas, Bob-ombs) are inherently less useful than those actively advancing your own position (mushrooms, stars, Bullet Bills).

And two: that first is the generally most boring place to be, especially if it's by a distance. With no other racers to bounce off of and none of the good toys to play with, you're left to optimise your racing line and wait for that Damoclean blue shell to fall.

By upending what success means, Knockout Tour makes it just as valuable to push another player below the elimination threshold as to overtake. And given the risks associated with being up front, it's more advantageous than ever to stay with the pack for as long as possible before going for the top spot. At least, that's what we tell ourselves, as we continually sneak into the next couple of open spots at each checkpoint.

Knockout Tour, then, is a brilliant, elegant rewriting of *Mario Kart's* rules. It's tempting to suggest that this one mode might represent a bigger change than the open-world shift, but we're not sure that it would be possible – or, at least, anywhere near as thrilling – on a traditional looped track. It is a successful experiment, then, surely one of those that will have its findings incorporated into the series permanently (and, we can't help but point out, surely it wouldn't be that hard to string together the existing tracks into new rallies). But, even more than that, could this be the beginning of a whole new formula? ■

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The Alters

Sometimes your life changes in a moment, and as much as you want to pause time and retrace your steps, the world moves on into the following hours and days, and takes you with it. This is the world builder Jan Dolski finds himself in when he is the only survivor of a crash on a mission to find the world-changing element rapidium. It's his job now to operate the mobile base and return to Earth – and hopefully finish the mission, too. There is no time to lose: come sunrise, the intense radiation will mean game over.

A day in *The Alters* counts down in realtime, and can be split between performing activities on the base and exploring the region outside. Production queues can be accessed anywhere and at any time to set up tasks, from creating one-off mining outposts to rolling orders that ensure a minimum level of edible mush. Working in the workshop or kitchen will then speed up time until the queued tasks are complete – or Dolski becomes fully exhausted, at 9pm.

Outside the base is where you secure the resources required to keep your production chains running. Shallow deposits will provide enough materials to build that early mining outpost – and then it's time to drill down into deep deposit zones and establish a network of pylons back to the base. In time, this exploration phase evolves, as the environments become more challenging to navigate. Energy-draining gates call for surplus suit batteries, shallow cave systems make a puzzle out of line-of-sight pylon placement, and highly radioactive anomalies need to be navigated around – or carefully harvested for their unique resources.

The problem, of course, is that such efforts are a job for an entire crew, and that's where the alters come in. With the newly found rapidium, and a currently unlawful procedure, Dolski can quickly grow clones of himself with altered memories of his life. At key 'what if?' moments in his past, they remember making different choices, and becoming different people as a result. Jan the technician, for example, who didn't go to university, instead staying home to protect his mother from his abusive father, is self-reliant, reluctant to trust, and emotionally intuitive underneath it all. He also has an efficiency bonus to base maintenance.

***The Alters* doesn't** shy away from the fact that the clones occupy dual roles here: they exist both as necessary labour, tools Dolski explicitly created to occupy time and tasks he can't, and as people. More than representations of Dolski's regrets, they come into the world with their own insecurities about the lives they remember living – and have to navigate the conflicts that arise when material reality no longer matches their truths, from scientific discoveries that were never made to relationships that were never repaired and lives that were never saved.

Developer/publisher 11 Bit Studios
Format PC (tested), PS5, Xbox Series
Release Out now

With the newly found rapidium, and a currently unlawful procedure, Dolski can quickly grow clones of himself



REAL TIME STRATEGY

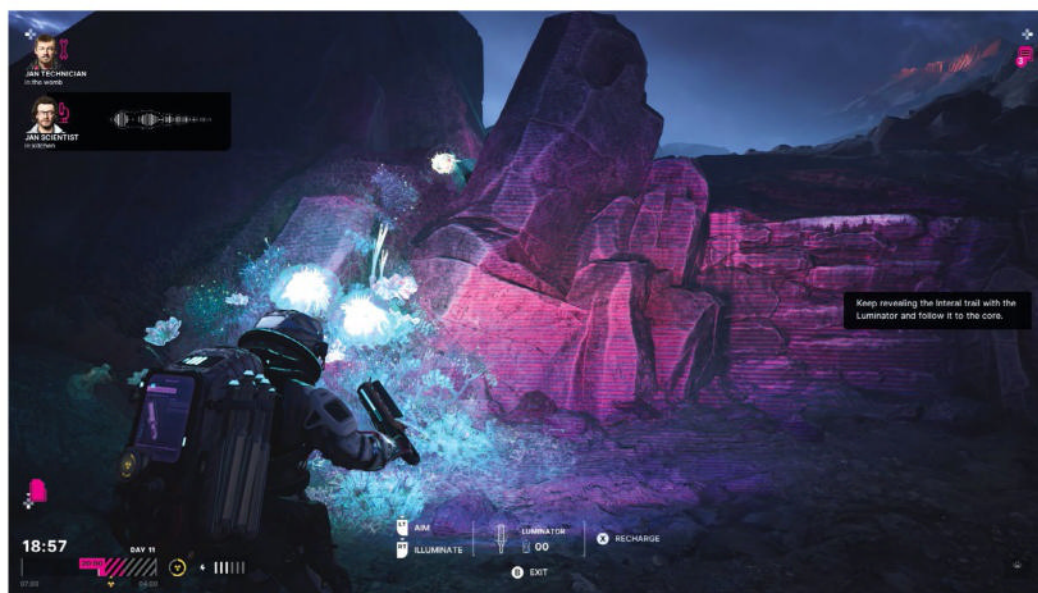
The threat of running out of time is real in *The Alters*. You have a limited number of days in each region before the sun rises – but you don't know how many days that is when you first arrive. Meanwhile, each night brings deadly radiation storms that interfere with any plans you may have to work late, and these arrive earlier in the evenings as sunrise comes closer. Mercifully, when you're at a mining outpost it's easy enough to fast-travel back, but overreach when you're exploring and you're given no such conveniences. Equally risky is making any decision about how much time you'll have to get something done 'tomorrow', without knowing how many tomorrows you have left in this location, or how many you're going to need.

To this end, you interact with Dolski's alters in a strictly mechanical way: the survival layer of the game sees you assign them to tasks at base and in the outside world, such as mining, cooking, or making equipment, and the amount of time they'll work voluntarily reflects how happy they are. The rote aspects of looking after the alters – ensuring they're eating good-quality food, have a space to socialise, aren't sleeping on the floor – feel as much like maintenance as queuing up repair kits to build does. Settling in for a movie night to raise morale? It's a bit like an office pizza party.

But equally, each alter has their own storyline, which plays out through personal interactions. While we won't spoil it, the miner is most pointedly aware of his dual role, as the Jan with benefits that are most immediately advantageous for cheap, fast labour – and whose storyline directly ties in with the human cost of having lived that way. It's entirely possible to miss these storylines, as they aren't managed in the same gamified way as everything else. While you can undertake individual quests and give gifts to your other selves, an ambiguous, very human, need to connect through dialogue pervades. By the end of our playthrough, we never got there with Jan the scientist, and it's a credit to Alex Jordan's performance when playing against himself to communicate that intertwined closeness and distance, like siblings divided by a large age gap.

Add the major ways the plot can branch, and the fact that there are more potential alters than you are able to awaken in one run, and *The Alters* lends itself to a meta 'what if?' scenario of its own, leaving you with questions and regrets about the path not taken – choices not made, opportunities missed, and people you never truly got to know. But while 11 Bit's strength has always been this mingling of narrative and strategic elements, in *The Alters* both the introduction of survival mechanics and unravelling of plot happen slowly, and you sense the developers were anxious you might not be willing to wait. In the early stages, it feels like there are aesthetic gestures towards other popular games (hello, *Control*) and easily negatable low-stakes choices, acting as reassuring fillers of sorts, which seem unnecessary.

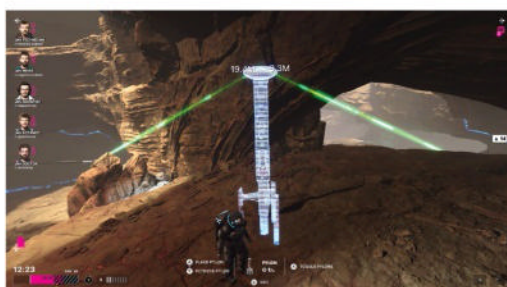
The Alters is unique in how it explores trust, regret, choice, self-sacrifice, labour and autonomy through its characters every bit as much as its pylon puzzles. Every time you stay out late and get scorched by radiation to ensure you have enough minerals to build the infirmary your alters need, or rely on an all-hands-on-deck crunch to make sure you're provisioned for a long stretch in the wilderness, the ticking clock makes consequences real, and there's no time to protest if your actions fail to line up with your theoretical principles. It's putting one foot in front of the other – which is often where, unnoticed, life can change just as significantly as in the dramatic choices.



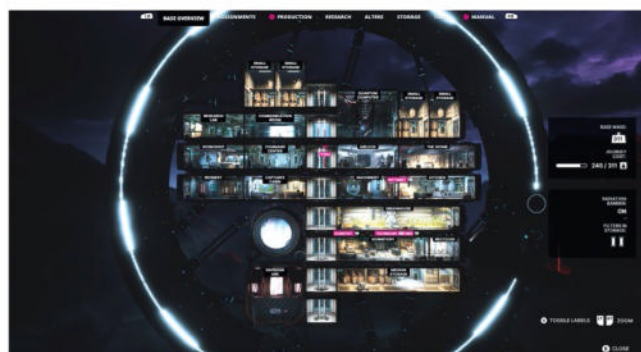
ABOVE Outside of work hours, the alters roam freely around your base, enjoying the facilities and striking up conversations.

LEFT Specific anomalies point to these glowing trails of webs and flowers, leading to the rarest materials for research upgrades.

BELOW Space is at a premium on the mobile base, and any potential upgrade is costly: miscalculating its resources, weight or fit could set you back precious days



ABOVE Establishing your network becomes a game of looking for the ledges and gaps where line of sight to your previous point and your next one isn't disrupted. In other words, it's thinking with pylons



MindsEye

There are big problems in Redrock, *MindsEye*'s techbro-infested near-future analogue of Las Vegas. Some of them are authored deliberately and satirically by developer Build A Rocket Boy — this is a narrative-led open-world shooter set in a city run by CEOs in baseball caps and self-interested government officials, and as you look around at malfunctioning AI robots and palatial tech company headquarters, you're reminded that it feels a bit close to home.

Other issues, however, appear accidental, but still by chance serve to exaggerate the big-tech dystopia *MindsEye* depicts. Take the way Redrock citizens tend to drive into each other and cause horrific, fiery car accidents on practically every block, or the way armed enemies act completely oblivious to your presence, as if they themselves are malfunctioning AI agents.

Then there are the problems Build a Rocket Boy surely didn't intend to include and don't enrich the game but dismantle it. There are, unfortunately, a lot of these. If you were a citizen of Redrock, you wouldn't prioritise pressuring local officials to scrutinise corporate tax affairs, you'd want them to fix the framerate so you could drive to work without getting a migraine.

The real question here isn't whether *MindsEye* is a good game — it isn't — but whether it would have been, if it were released in a technically stable state. Might the hokey but occasionally well-observed social commentary have been worth digesting, and could the story have risen above the basic cover shooting? Certainly there are component parts worth salvaging. You are Jacob Diaz, a military veteran suffering PTSD flashbacks and convenient memory loss following a traumatic failed operation. Now back on civvy street, you call in a favour from your friend Seb, who works at Silva Corp, the tech giant that made the neural implant in your neck. You take a job there in order to get close to the man who designed this *MindsEye* and uncover the truth about it.

There's something compelling about Silva Corp, as on-the-nose as its portrayal might be. Yes, its EVs look suspiciously like Tesla Model 3s, but its CEO Marco Silva isn't a cackling megalomaniac and his intentions are presented with nuance. The architecture of Jacob's new workplace is impressive, all grand corridors full of people and machines acting as though they have important things to do. Silva's office is pure Cyberdyne, with momentous products kept behind glass like museum exhibits. You feel the lingering presence of Paul Verhoeven and James Cameron throughout. It's as if it's all been stitched together from the bits of '80s action cinema left on the cutting-room floor, and that carries through from its snappy pacing to an excellent soundtrack full of insistent, minimal synth stabs.

The trouble is, you're picking all these details out at the framerate of a Victorian zoetrope. Unreal Engine 5's Nanite and Lumen technologies have been leveraged by

Developer Build A Rocket Boy
Publisher IO Interactive
Format PC (tested), PS5, Xbox Series
Release Out now

What's striking about playing a game like this in 2025 is that there aren't many games like this in 2025



EVERYWHERE, ALL AT ONCE *MindsEye* was originally devised as a proof of concept for BARB's Everywhere platform, a sort of grownup Roblox where a story-led action game could live within a wider technical ecosystem which players and creators could add to over time. To that end there's a detailed and expensive-looking level editor available with the PC release for players to craft their own levels and missions. Its functionality is expansive, but its inclusion raises questions about development priorities, given the technical state of *MindsEye*. Everywhere itself has been in closed beta since June 2024, and whatever the plan was for it, *MindsEye*'s release troubles will surely now have an impact. It's going to take more than some user-generated content to dig the project out of a hole.

BARB to assemble a sprawling space reaching for photorealism, but the technology simply feels unable to deliver it. Framerates on PC are punctuated by constant and prolonged stutters and hangs, regardless of graphics settings, frame-generation techniques or resolution. It keeps you at arm's length from immersing yourself in *MindsEye*'s world even before you're tasked with any meaningful interactions. And then the gunfire starts.

We suspect that, even under flawless performance, the shootouts would feel punitive. There are many elements that can make gunplay punchy: the way crosshairs animate and colour-code hits, sound cues that sell the impact of a bullet meeting its target, enemy placements arranged to create ebb and flow, a sense of brinksmanship. None of these are present here. Instead, there are waves of enemies who seem barely aware of you, arriving like they've been ordered over the Maginot Line, ready to be mown down without a moment's thought from behind some awkward, sticky cover. Even the crosshair feels perfunctory. Since *MindsEye* is an open-world shooter, these encounters are its bread and butter. The fact they're so repetitive is grave. The fact they run at almost unplayable framerates is terminal.

More's the shame, because what's striking about playing a game like this in 2025 is that there aren't many games like this in 2025. The landscape used to be teeming with *GTA* clones that chucked you in a car and shouted some exposition at you before you arrived at the next firefight, but *MindsEye*'s structure feels almost novel now. Former Rockstar North president Leslie Benzies, who serves as game director and chief writer here, obviously has an innate talent for laying games out this way, and the frequent diversions into guiding a drone to tail people or gather intel have a whiff of *GTA* heist planning to them, too. But while casing a joint in *GTA* is thrilling because you know there's a bombastic payoff on its way, *MindsEye* fails to reward your sleuthing and sends you into an unrelated cover fight or car chase instead. At least the driving is stronger than the shooting. Vehicle physics are luxurious and bouncy, as if imported from a different, better game.

Perhaps games of this type became less common because so often they were mechanically serviceable but creatively slight. They threw perfectly fine assaults at you and hoped you wouldn't notice they had nothing to say. *MindsEye* is close to the inverse of that. Its world feels considered. There are decent performances from its cast among the graphical artefacts, and zippy pacing that respects your time and conjures a sense of playing the Schwarzenegger role that never was. But it's been released in a technical state that makes it impossible to enjoy its ideas, with core components of its action left underdeveloped. For the player, that's frustrating. For those who made it, surely, it's heartbreaking.

RIGHT Car-chase gunfights are among several variants of set-piece design resurrected from yesteryear.
BELOW Although driving sections provide some stunning views, the roads of Redrock can be laid out bizarrely and pathfinding is tricky.
MAIN The range of technology beneath Silva Corp's umbrella includes the drone-like 'sky car'



ABOVE In this sequence, which was so difficult in its original form that players complained (leading to a patch to make things less punishing), Jacob administers CPR via QTE. David Cage must be kicking himself



FBC: Firebreak

Often when evaluating shooters we'll talk about 'gunfeel' – how satisfying it is to use your weapons for their intended purpose.

But what of the targets lined up in their sights? There are certain qualities that tend to make for a good FPS enemy: mobility, a balance of predictable behaviour and capacity for surprise, and (perhaps troublingly) a humanoid, or at least bipedal, shape.

These boxes are all squarely ticked by the Hiss, lifted from the telekinetic thirdperson action of *Control* and repurposed for a co-op FPS in the mould of *Left 4 Dead* or *Vermintide*. *Firebreak* retains some of the more unusual mutations of this threat – such as the Elevated, who bob around in flying office chairs – and adds one of its own, the Breaker, a take on *Halo*'s brutish Hunter whose back-mounted weak point takes the form of a flopping human corpse. By and large, though, the Hiss are rendered here as a generic zombie horde, recognisable from *Control* only by that petrol-rainbow smear they leave when shot. They're meat, essentially, to be fed into your three-person grinder, and an average mission will end with each player's kill count somewhere in the hundreds. Yet these numbers pale in comparison to the Oldest House's sticky-note infestation.

Playing Post-it exterminator is an amusingly quirky notion, but it's a gag that wears thin as you empty bullets into pile after pile of stationary stationery. They fulfil none of the criteria for an interesting FPS target, and yet shooting them accounts for a large proportion of our time in *Firebreak*. We glance up at the HUD, see there are another 320,647 of the damn things to be destroyed before we can leave, and sigh.

This process can at least be accelerated by application of the right status effects, a concept at the very core of *Firebreak*'s combat. Oil puddles can be ignited, causing the paper to burn, while spraying notes with your Splash Kit (essentially a machine gun disguised as a hose) will make them soggy and thus, naturally, more vulnerable to bullets. Meanwhile, the sticky notes' sole defensive measure is a status effect of their own: get too close and they'll begin latching on and obscuring your screen. Once the UI gauge has filled, you'll die, leaving behind a shambling paper effigy that will attack your allies.

For all that we've fixated on this particular papery menace, it's worth noting that they appear in just one of *Firebreak*'s five mission types (or 'Jobs'). Still, for whatever reason, Paper Chase is the one that comes up most in matchmaking, and the majority of Jobs are similarly built around some static target, into which you pour ammunition in exchange for negative status effects. Ground Control has sluglike leeches protruding from rockfaces above the level, harmless but for the irradiated pearls they drop when shot; Frequency Shift covers the level in pink goo which must be

Developer/publisher Remedy Entertainment
Format PC (tested), PS5, Xbox Series
Release Out now

It's an amusingly quirky notion, but it wears thin as you empty bullets into pile after pile of stationary stationery



CONTROL ALT

It's perhaps no surprise that *Firebreak*'s greatest asset is the game from which it's spawned. The Oldest House remains a charmingly unusual setting, especially when its brutalist angles are bathed in the red light that announces the arrival of a new wave of Hiss. The 'Altered Augment' ultimates (deadly piggybanks, teapots and garden gnomes) are all perfect expansions of this universe, as are the Corrupted Items that add mutators to missions – such as a haunted traffic light that will follow one player and dictate when they can move. But elsewhere *Firebreak* fails to maintain a harmonious tone. *Control* had a sense of humour, but it was never this zany, while the junkyard helmets and armour fail to gel with the rest of the game's aesthetic.

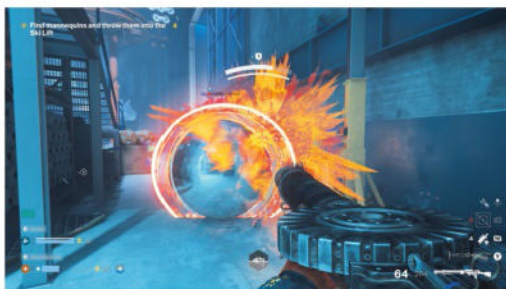
popped, and which can coat your body with bubblegum-like pustules that explode when under fire.

As a replacement for the supernatural abilities *Control* offered, these status effects fall short. In a fast-paced firstperson action game, where your field of view is limited, it can be hard to tell what's caused them. (Did you really step close enough to that fire to catch light? Why are you being electrocuted?) Their effects, meanwhile, are abstract in comparison to an incoming grenade or melee attack. It's unsatisfying to die because a meter filled on your HUD, and as an offensive measure, setting up a water-electric combo lacks the immediacy and reliability of filling an enemy with bullets.

It doesn't help that the game takes so long to introduce tools that allow you to play effectively in its elemental sandbox. On our first few sorties we're armed only with a choice of three starter guns (shotgun, SMG, revolvers) and three Crisis Kits (Splash, Fix, Jump), all of which are marked 'Faulty' – and feel it. The former are ineffectual peashooters; the latter lack most of their functions. Opt for the Fix Kit, for example, and your class-defining tool is a wrench. It can mend broken equipment – something that can be done by players whatever their Kit, albeit more slowly and involving a potentially harmful QTE. And to begin with that's all it does. You have to earn not only the wrench's secondary ability, which causes you to rush forward, but also (at least, before a post-launch patch) its ability to do damage on connecting with an enemy's skull. Only once you've put in the hours will the Fix Kit begin to fill with complementary tools: a deployable auto-turret, then an ultimate ability that affixes a supernatural piggybank to the wrench's end, transforming it temporarily into a fearsome melee weapon.

Only after unlocking the abilities, and upgrading, do your tools offer a viable alternative to shooting. Here, finally, is a game that has something to set it apart from any other co-op shooter you might name, with more of the *Control* flavour that is surely *Firebreak*'s draw for most players. But in order to earn this version of the game, you must endure one in which the most interesting systems are partitioned off – three times, if you want to be able to switch between all the Crisis Kits.

Exactly how long that will take remains in flux. Shortly after release, Remedy updated *Firebreak* to speed up progression, and the developer has pledged to reduce the early-game grind. But this comes too late for anyone who was there at the beginning. Returning to that gunfeel metric, *Firebreak*'s weapons and tools do eventually become satisfying enough in the hands, and are lent extra oomph by the quirky stylishness of their context. But ultimately, however quickly this becomes achievable, you're still going to be using them to do the same old paperwork.



ABOVE In retrospect, the Hiss Clusters in *Control* might have been the thin end of the wedge for abstract, non-humanoid enemies. But at least there you could use mind control to turn them into a health-providing ally



MAIN At higher levels you can activate Corruption, adding random mutators to a mission until you locate the item responsible and destroy it with a special weapon.

ABOVE The Jump Kit's name has two meanings: its electrical charge is used to jumpstart dead machinery, but it also has a hydraulic push that can be aimed at the floor to launch you into the air.

LEFT Lighting is one of the many systems in need of repair around The Oldest House. While relying on your torch isn't ideal, the dark does allow Remedy's wonderful illumination effects to hit harder

Dune: Awakening

Progress in *Dune: Awakening* can be divided into two distinct parts: before and after flight. As though dragging your way through human history, you have to work your way up from hunter-gatherer status for the privilege of being airborne. The pre-flight era is dominated by solo exploration, mining for resources, crafting and PvE combat within the Hagga Basin. In Frank Herbert's novel, the Basin is the area of Arrakis most populous with cities and villages, including those of the hardy Fremen, who are (relatively speaking) native to the planet. In *Awakening's* alternate timeline, the Fremen are missing, driven away by the pogroms of the Imperial elite troops. Without their cleansing influence, the Basin is infested with riff-raff: scavengers, slavers, smugglers, cultists. Other players can be seen scurrying around, but there's little incentive to buddy up at this point (and if you'd like a private server to enjoy with your friends, you need to pay for the privilege).

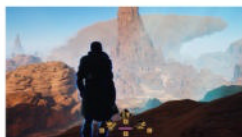
The unsavoury inhabitants organise into countless outposts, which you can clear out in exchange for loot, experience and resources. This is one of the game's main stumbling blocks, its open-world laundry list inviting fatigue. The Basin's geography is pleasingly varied, but each region contains a similar spread of caves, forts, terraforming labs and shipwrecks. The game's prose and voice acting are consistently excellent, so there are genuinely interesting, well-acted stories tucked away in these dungeons. But repetitive settings and predictable AI mean firefights rarely feel worthwhile. Some enemies don't react until you're breathing down their necks. Others spam grenades and rush right at you.

Close-quarters knife fights, meanwhile, comprise blocks, dodges, counters and light and slow attacks. However, since – faithful to the lore – personal shields can only be penetrated by slow attacks, your only recourse is to bait opponents to create openings so that you can shatter their defences. Specialist skills acquired via RPG progression trees, such as the Bene Gesserit Voice or Spice-induced prescience, offer some variety, but are seldom necessary.

The unchanging loop of the dungeons is compounded by the game's interminable pacing. Base building is effortless (even if the results often look like a brutalist nightmare), and few things are as satisfying as weathering a sandstorm inside, but the process of filling a base with equipment and materials is a slog. Perhaps this comes with the territory of open-world survival, a genre with inherent expectations of research, mining, refining and construction queues – the drip-feed that makes eventual progression more satisfying. Even so, it's unclear why each step in the process needs to take quite *this* long. You need around 240 aluminium ingots to build all the parts for the dragonfly-like ornithopter, for instance, and each ingot takes 30 seconds to refine. That's two hours to manufacture enough of just one

Developer/publisher Funcom
Format PC
Release Out now

Base building is effortless, but the process of filling a base with equipment and materials is a slog



JUST DESERTS

As we reach the post-flight part of the game, we regret our largely solitary pre-flight lifestyle. *Awakening* does not provide in-game matchmaking, so we turn to Discord in search of a Guild, a grouping of up to 32 players who can band together to mine Dune's Spice, Melange, and tackle weekly Landsraad objectives to gain bonuses. Unfortunately, there's nothing suitable in our 'world' (a set of linked servers), so we go it alone. As such, it could be weeks before we're suitably coordinated for the kind of exciting, large-scale Spice mining operations the game promises. Funcom has acknowledged this problem since release and is working to rebalance the Deep Desert towards PvE, but we've yet to see how successful this will be.

ingredient, not to mention the steps required to establish the means to refine it in the first place.

As such, we're more than 40 hours into *Awakening* before we enter its post-flight period. The payoff is initially exhilarating, at least. The Basin is transformed from a series of obstacles into a playground, more missions become available and, most importantly, we gain access to the Deep Desert, the promised land of the mid-to-end game. While some of the Basin's shipwrecks offer brief toe dips into PvP, the Deep Desert is its true arena. We see the contours of an endgame that could solve the typical struggles of online multiplayer by offering something distinct from, not merely grander than, the early game. Unfortunately, there are many more hours of grind ahead before we can begin to truly realise that potential (see 'Just deserts').

Still, our first few forays into the Deep Desert are captivating. Gliding over the mass of the Shield Wall, the dunes stretching towards the horizon like a golden sea and the wings of our ornithopter creaking in the wind, we're overcome with a sense of vulnerability. Alone, with the bare minimum of equipment to cross into this foreboding landscape, we realise that if we meet other players, we are certain to die.

Despite this cruel reality, this is the main reason we enjoy a lot of our time with *Awakening*. It is an uncompromising, often harsh, but rarely unfair world that is firmly rooted in Frank Herbert's fiction. Died of thirst? Retrieve your belongings, then make a stillsuit so it can trap and recycle your moisture; bring a water canister; stay out of the sun to avoid heatstroke. Eaten by a sandworm? Well, your belongings are lost, but now you know to respect the worm. When the vibration indicator turns red and you hear the guttural rumble underground, pray you can make it off the sand in time.

It helps, too, that the story is surprisingly engaging. It is a little bloated, no doubt to serve the emphasis on survival and crafting in the pre-flight part of the game, but post-flight it develops into a mystery concerning the missing Fremen. The pivot away from Herbert's timeline, and especially from Paul Atreides, has left thematic holes – the danger of charismatic leadership, destiny and determinism, the relationship between ecology and culture are all muted or missing – but it has liberated Funcom to pursue a novel plotline and introduce new and classic characters in unexpected ways.

"Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration." So goes Dune's infamous Litany Against Fear. "I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me." Just so, *Awakening* teaches you to balance the fear of failure against the rewards of its many systems. It is not the Golden Path threaded by Paul Atreides and his son, but nor is it comparable to the massacre left behind by his holy war.



LEFT The Hagga Basin is dominated by smaller worms and sandstorms. In the Deep Desert, weekly coriolis storms reset the map, while the enormous Shai-Hulud is capable of laying claim to an entire guild. **MAIN** Basin regions are arranged anticlockwise in terms of least to most difficult, but there are no signposted levels or arbitrary gating to offer specific guidance. **BOTTOM** Base building recalls something of *Dune II*'s classic construction queues, but the way player bases pepper the Hagga Basin feels a bit like gentrification



ABOVE Character models look dated, but the aesthetic is an intriguing mixture of visions of the stories, encapsulating elements from the movies of David Lynch and Denis Villeneuve, along with the 2024 TV miniseries



Rematch

Rocket League without the wheels – what will they think of next? For its first foray into sports-sim territory, fighting-genre specialist Slocap has borrowed liberally from Psyonix's vehicular mutation of football to mould its own highly idiosyncratic hybrid: six-minute matches, no fouls or offsides, physics tweaked for maximum on-pitch chaos. Yet, paradoxically, *Rematch*'s exaggerated heroics, breakneck pace and flagrant disregard for the rules of the sport may capture the essence of the beautiful game far more accurately than the endlessly iterated template established by *FIFA* and *Pro Evolution Soccer*.

To create an accessible, replayable football sim, Slocap has homed in on a simple fact. Even prior to *Rocket League*, some of the most fondly remembered examples of the genre, such as *Kick Off* and *Sensible Soccer*, were those that foregrounded the gap between plan and execution. Visualise this: you're in a pocket of space just inside the 18-yard box. Your winger has drawn both defenders toward them before launching a cross. An image starts forming in your head: the second-touch shot rocking the back of the net; your player knee-sliding in celebration. Only that tableau disintegrates in the split second it takes for the ball to bounce off your shin, sending the opposing sweeper (who, a heartbeat ago, looked half a pitch away) hurtling towards your goal, while you scramble to avert the counter.

The ball is a volatile, capricious thing in *Rematch*. Like an overexcited ferret, it wiggles about your feet when you've had barely a moment to consider what to do with it, and dashes away at impossible trajectories when you need it to stay put. Passing and shooting mostly force it to follow your bidding (the former more obediently than the latter, which is affected by your body position), but nailing down precise angles and accurately measuring distances are skills to develop over time. And, in the metres that separate intentions from results, someone with the wrong strip tends to lurk, waiting to intercept.

That your plans are easily sabotaged is a deliberate design choice, making the rare moment when an orchestrated team move or solo effort does work all the more gratifying. Constant shifts in tenor as attack turns to defence and back again make for a breathless kind of fun, and even in your mistakes there's a sense of lessons learned. Pundits have been using the term 'PlayStation football' for some time, referring to sequences of real-world play so robotically coordinated they seem lifted from a *FIFA* match. For Slocap, the mere possibility of surviving in a niche dominated by EA's behemoth (and its current offshoot) would require it to design counter to that template. In making unpredictability *Rematch*'s defining feature, from the wobbliness of aiming to the challenge of beating defenders, it has achieved just that.

Another major concern with an online-only release is nudging players toward more constructive habits, and

Developer Slocap
Publisher Kepler Interactive
Format PC (tested), PS5, Xbox Series
Release Out now

The ball is a volatile, capricious thing. Like an overexcited ferret, it wiggles about your feet



SKILLS VS TACTICS

Matches can be played with three, four, or five players per team, with the experience changing drastically according to the number. An ideal entry point, 3v3 games offer ample time and space to hone skills: weigh your crosses, aim your shots, evaluate passing options. Goalkeepers are more versatile here, often straying as far as the halfway line to distribute the ball, and roles change rapidly as play shifts from one end of the pitch to the other. In contrast, 5v5 matches (currently the only available ranked mode), require a modicum of tactical restraint: sticking to your position, knowing where your teammates are, being able to predict the game's ebb and flow. Hopefully, this extra layer of tactical demands will keep *Rematch* from becoming stale.

the French studio has been equally shrewd in that regard. The scoring system acknowledges teamwork and positive contributions, such as passes, interceptions and saves, while snubbing flashy, solipsistic play – no points for dribbling, nor for meaningless shots that fail to find the goal. Given that you control a single player throughout the match (even though your role rotates after every goal), it's also important that keepers, always a tough position to sell, have been granted infinite boost, which gives them flexibility to also operate as sweeper/playmakers, especially in less-crowded 3v3 contests.

However wisely implemented, though, Slocap's efforts can only go so far in dictating the way people play, and there's a discernible dropoff in the experience when you switch from your gaming group to a bunch of random teammates. A revolving cast of familiar characters – the ball hog, the one who quick-chats "Good job!" after every blunder, the never-keeper – populates these parts, though the ranked 5v5 mode presents a relatively safe haven, because everyone is more invested in winning than showing off.

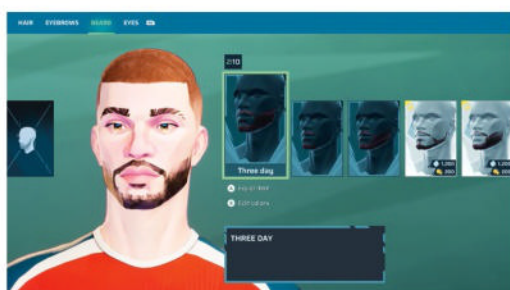
Similarly, despite the care that's gone into negating the possibility of predictable play patterns, scripts are already emerging. The most common of these will use the invisible barriers surrounding the pitch to bounce the ball off the wall above the keeper, luring them into an impossible save, and following up with an overhead kick for an easy goal. It's a minor complaint, but could signal the unravelling of *Rematch* if other, similar exploits are discovered and disrupt the flow of the game.

Moreover, we can't help wondering if this is symptomatic of more inherent limitations. There's a simple reason why, as annoying as its playerbase could become, ball hogging was rarely an issue in *Rocket League* – controlling the ball by tapping at it with an inflexible bumper requires many rapid calculations involving impact angle and vehicle speed that caressing it with the outside of your foot does not, however wobbly your physics. Exuberant, freeform play is easier to prescribe when calculated efficacy is out of reach for anyone but veterans. With *Rematch*, novices can start practising their rainbow flicks within the first hour.

Judging a game made for perpetual tinkering is a thankless task, but certain qualities are already evident. *Rematch*, especially with friends, is an immediate, exhilarating caricature of football. Its pared-down mechanics inject joy back into a sport that's been hollowed out, both in real life through surrender to capital and geopolitics, and as simulation, in the gears of service-game profit-making machines. But, as much as fun as it is, there's a worry it might move towards one-dimensional repetition. Slocap's experiment in removing the wheels has been largely successful, but only time will tell if the concept has legs.



LEFT A frame appears around an airborne ball when it's within your range, helping you to time headers and acrobatic strikes. **BELOW** New stadium backdrops can be unlocked through *Rematch*'s season pass, among other rather uninspired treats. **MAIN** It's tempting to opt for a sliding tackle to stop a shot, but often more sensible to assume a defensive stance and try to block



ABOVE Naturally, you can customise your player's appearance, including their kit style. A fairly wide range of options is available to begin with, with plenty more to be earned as rewards for progress, or paid for



Splitgate 2

Valve first had people considering portals back in 2007. Given the videogame industry's tendency to propagate any new and popular idea with a speed and aggressiveness that quickly renders it background noise, it's somewhat remarkable that it took 12 years for another game, the original *Splitgate*, to take that idea and run with it. As this sequel demonstrates, however, taking a great idea and finding the right fit for it are two very different things.

A firstperson arena shooter with portals remains a strong foundation. *Splitgate* places no restrictions on how far apart two portal gates are, nor how far you may be from a compatible surface when you shoot a gate onto it. Therefore, portals can be used to instantly travel great distances, or to set up or escape ambushes. Projectiles travel through them as easily as players, and while you can make use of any portal, all but your own are opaque. There's no way of knowing if there's a sniper at the other end, or what else may be waiting for you if you leap through. Unlike in any other shooter, then, you have the ability to defend two objectives at once with no direct line of sight between them, snipe an enemy that is dozens of feet behind you, or flee around a corner and reach the (relative) safety of the other side of the map within seconds.

The fundamental issue in *Splitgate 2* is that while such moments of physics-bending deriding-do burn brightly, they do so within an experience that seems reluctant to enable them. The maps, compared to the first game's, feel stunted and restrictive. There's a loss of verticality and too much reliance on enclosed spaces and tight corners. This issue is less pronounced in more open stages, but it's an omnipresent indication of a wider problem. In *Splitgate*, portals were the axle upon which the chaotic battles spun. *Splitgate 2* appears to be a game embarrassed by its central mechanic.

Perhaps too much is designed to appeal to the esports community and YouTubers and streamers. The maps are slickly produced but sterile, with the SSL initialism and associated images for the in-universe sports league spattered everywhere. Each of the three character classes wears a figure-hugging suit befitting an athlete, and the launch even saw a 'creator clash' event that encouraged players to pledge allegiance to a team with the promise of unlockable cosmetics. It's thus designed to be watched at least as much as it is to be played, which does nothing to help *Splitgate 2* stand out. There's no shortage of FPS games chasing streamers like a dog following its master.

It may be unfair to suggest that map design intentionally discourages portal use at times, but there's circumstantial evidence to support the idea. Many players use portals very little, and it's telling that one of the limited-time modes available at launch disables portals entirely. The message, it seems, is that

Developer/publisher 1047 Games
Format PC, PS4, PS5 (tested),
 Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

The edges have been softened, and it threatens to fade into the omnipresent haze of live-service shooters



COD COMPLEX

At this year's Summer Game Fest, in addition to a choice of headwear that will haunt him forever, Ian Proulx declared that he was "tired of playing the same *Call Of Duty* every year". It seems not everybody in the *Splitgate* community feels the same way, though, as replicas of recurring *Call Of Duty* maps Nuketown, Shipment, Rust and Shoot House (so far) have already been made with the map editor, with Nuketown proving particularly popular. It's a testament to the quality of the editor that some of these are quite convincing copies, though we're not quite sure how 1047 will feel about the fact that people are using *Splitgate 2* to play Gun Game in Shipment. It's unlikely that editors in other games will be used to replicate maps from this one.

if you dislike the concept or are nervous about a shooter with portals, you won't need to use them at all.

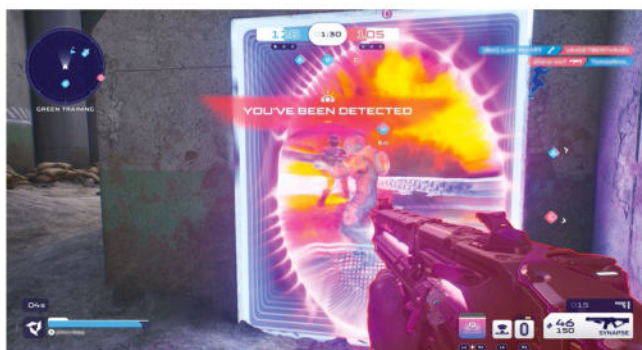
Splitgate 2 further steps away from its roots by introducing weapon attachments, character classes with unique abilities, perks and customisable loadouts – none of which the first game offered, or required. Such features work perfectly well for a lot of excellent competitive shooters, but that's why it's a misjudged call here. By disincentivising portal use and adding familiar elements, the edges of *Splitgate 2*'s identity have been softened, and it now threatens to fade into the omnipresent haze of live-service shooters.

And that's somewhat tragic since there's an extremely good game fighting for air underneath these missteps. Movement is fast and smooth, buoyed further by a jetpack that allows you to briefly glide or, used in bursts, bounce through the air. Most weapons are unremarkable but all are accurate and useful in a firefight, with a few – such as the fully automatic Blitz shotgun, with its satisfying *thud-thud-thud* in your hands – a joy to use whether you hit your mark or not.

As for game modes, there's a clear highlight in the form of Blitzball, where each team fights to be the first to capture three balls at their base. It's a simple concept spiced up by a few caveats: a new ball occasionally spawns in the middle of the arena, captured balls can be stolen from the enemy base, and you cannot use weapons while carrying a ball. The best Blitzball matches are a tug-of-war as balls are captured, stolen, recaptured, stolen again, camped on and chased across the map.

The lack of a dedicated Blitzball playlist at time of writing, however, is baffling, and the package overall is far more focused on more familiar attractions. For all 1047 CEO Ian Proulx's railing against the state of the FPS landscape, most modes here can be found in a hundred other games, with some, such as Team Deathmatch, Domination and Gun Game, using precisely the same names and rules as apparent arch-nemesis *Call Of Duty*. There's also a battle royale mode (because of course there is), pitting 15 teams of four against one another, which is enjoyable enough. That enjoyment is hampered by poor optimisation, though, which results in an unstable framerate. It makes you wonder what *Splitgate 2* might have looked like if the resources spent on chasing trends had been channelled into something unique, built around the game's core conceit.

True, *Splitgate 2* does a decent job implementing the fundamentals of a firstperson shooter, and occasionally makes a deeper impression with flourishes that can't be found elsewhere. But in moving too far towards established tastes, it more closely resembles what its creators profess to fight against. Like a player stepping through the wrong portal, it finds itself outnumbered and outgunned by the competition.



ABOVE By dropping you into the fray with nothing but a pistol, and with the emphasis on scavenging, battle royale comes close to the simplicity of the first *Splitgate*, though underwhelming map design mutes its potential

TOP Bold red outlines ensure that your opponents are identifiable immediately, enabling the necessary splitsecond reactions.

ABOVE Portal camping is a legitimate tactic, but one that requires you to keep one eye on the minimap for threats emerging on your side of the portal.

RIGHT When a player leaves a match early, they are replaced with a bot. Naturally, then, bots are common sights during play



Date Everything!

Perhaps this is what Marx meant when he talked about the commodity fetish. *Date Everything* is a game in which you more or less do as the title says. A mysterious benefactor grants you glasses that transform every object in your house, from the microwave to the smoke alarm, into a sort of human being. Then you get to know them and influence them to like, love or hate you. There is an overarching plot, detailing the motives of your benefactor, but you'll spend most of your time talking to objects (and solving a few puzzles in the explorable house).

All the talk means the game lives or dies on the strength of its writing, and unfortunately, more often than not, it dies. *Date Everything* resides downstream from two trends: visual novels as joke products; and a kind of wholesome horniness, as seen in the likes of *Hades*. Yet unlike the April Fool's jokes and brand love-ins that are its obvious ancestors, *Date Everything* is sincere. Many of its 100 characters deal with real issues. Each of the objects in the house has pre-existing relationships with others. There's a bright enthusiasm to the way Sassy Chap Games maps this miniature world, loading it with luminous personalities and absurd lore. But if the jokey conceit offers elevator-

A fully voiced script gives the jokes a cadence they might not have otherwise. But a stunt cast assembled from well-known voice actors, including Laura Bailey and Troy Baker, makes it all feel a little too silly

Developer Sassy Chap Games
Publisher Team17
Format PC (tested), PS5, Switch, Xbox Series
Release Out now



LOOKING FOR LOVE

Puzzles provide some of *Date Everything*'s brighter points. The house is an interlocking location in the vein of *Myst*'s central island, and while many of the 'datable' objects are obvious and in plain sight, finding some requires more investigation. What's going on with the shadow that never disappears, for example, or the key to a locked attic? True, you won't find holistic puzzles on the level of Cyan's adventure here by any stretch, but it's all capably assembled and involving.

pitch marketability, it also hampers the game's potential. No single character can get too much writing, because there are 99 others. Nothing in the game can get too serious or sexy – what if they alienate someone?

Not all of *Date Everything*'s characters are clichés, but they are all lean. Most are defined either by matching or contrasting with what you'd expect them to be. Maggie the magnifying glass is an over-keen detective. Timothy Timepiece is precise and exacting, at least until evening rolls around and his second personality emerges. It doesn't help that the self-insert protagonist is a total cypher, defined mostly by not having friends. On a few occasions, they're fleshed out to develop certain relationships. Conversations with the Diary character, for example, involve untangling her psyche from yours – but that's a rare moment when taking the core concept seriously ends in real resonance. In most other plots, your avatar is merely a mouthpiece to spout nice (or mean) things. It's hard to get invested in a romance when one side of it is empty.

When its absurdity reaches full-on delirium, there is something charming about the whole affair (one quest involving a sink that thinks he's a man is a highlight). Yet its script remains scattershot, making you laugh one line and groan the next. With all the colour and oddness *Date Everything* musters, it can't overcome the fact that it treats its characters like objects.

5



Nintendo Switch 2 Welcome Tour

Like us, we imagine that your first goal on setting up a new console is *not* to sit and read about its features but to play with them. And yet the first exhibit we land on in *Welcome Tour* is a series of information boards explaining the ins and outs of Switch 2's new mouse control, followed by a quiz in which we regurgitate the information just fed to us.

This is an oddly dry and clinical package in many ways. As you trot around giant renditions of the console – outside and in – Nintendo's public mask of cheery characters and fantasy worlds dissolves, baring the businesslike workings beneath. Any enthusiasm here feels inauthentic, forced through the mouths of NPCs in the virtual exhibition as they proclaim their amazement at the genius of HD Rumble 2. The Disneyland promise of new Nintendo hardware thus manifests as a school trip to the science museum.

Not that there isn't a certain genius to HD Rumble 2, and when you enter *Welcome Tour's* tech demos and minigames you discover they can provide moments of delight. The sensation of sawing a piece of wood in half with vertical mouse movements and variable vibrations is remarkable. We're also taken by a touchscreen variant of Twister, a gamification of the kickstand in which

Nintendo seems pleased with Switch 2's technical capabilities, as if blissfully unaware that many have already been industry standard for a while now. Still, HDR and 4K demos do neatly illustrate upgrades from the original

Developer/publisher Nintendo
Format Switch 2
Release Out now



PACK IT IN

The elephant in *Welcome Tour's* sterile rooms is that the package could only *really* make sense as a preinstalled freebie. No one would begrudge its demos and minigames in a trimmed-down format bundled as an interactive instruction manual. Nintendo's insistence on selling things separately also means that accessories such as the camera and Pro controller get short shrift here. While both appear, with no guarantee that players will own them, only a single minigame is designed for each.

we're asked to adjust it to match a given angle, and an exercise in face-pulling mimicry.

But these are magical *moments*, never more than that, and mainly it's the hardware that impresses us, not the game design. An early mouse minigame, for example, ably demonstrates the accuracy of the device (even when placed on a trouser leg), but the activity itself – which involves weaving a UFO between spiked balls – is the lowest grade of fun. Also, while *Welcome Tour* takes us all over Switch 2 and its accessories, the bulk of attractions focus on rumble or mouse control (there's only so much mileage in showing off 4K resolution or 120fps), with the latter over-exercised to the point that a few of its minigames are a poor fit, revealing its limitations.

The clearest signal that entertainment is of secondary concern here, though, is that progress is gated not by minigames but by stamps, which you collect by scouring each location until button prompts materialise, enabling you to label each part of the console. In short, *Welcome Tour* seems designed more to highlight USB ports and air intake vents than give us a game. The climax of our tour sees us trapped inside our new machine, running laps and poking into every corner, praying we'll find the last stamp to open the exit. At this point, one question about Switch 2 remains: Nintendo, how did it come to this?

3





Titanfall 2

The rise and Titanic fall of the
live-service game that wasn't

BY LUKE KEMP



Developer Respawn Entertainment **Publisher** EA **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2016

Today's triple-A game industry is so in thrall to the live-service model that we have become accustomed to central play mechanics changing after launch, limited-time events staged to ensure that you remain engaged, and digital stores placed front and centre, pushing constantly updated carousels of premium cosmetics. The transition to this way of doing business was so swift that few games exist that straddle the divide between the old and the new. One rare example is Respawn's *Titanfall 2*.

It's not clear how profits from live-service successes trickle down directly to low-level employees, but it's easy to imagine the process happening slowly. A wrangling over bonuses, in fact, indirectly birthed the original *Titanfall*. In 2010, Vince Zampella and Jason West were fired from Infinity Ward shortly after the release of the hugely successful *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, for "breach of contract and insubordination". Many members of the team followed them out of the door in support, partly due to the claim that Activision was withholding *Modern Warfare 2* royalties until work on *Modern Warfare 3* was complete. Thus, Respawn Entertainment was born.

With the inevitable suits and counter-suits that followed, it was probably inevitable that Respawn's debut project would want to avoid any accusations of lifting concepts from *Call Of Duty*. With its futuristic setting, wallrunning and towering 'Titan' mechs, *Titanfall* delivered on that front. What the game did not have was a release on a PlayStation console — or a traditional campaign mode.

In a parallel universe, *Titanfall 2* leaned heavily into the always-online nature of the first game, and joined *Dead By Daylight* and *Overwatch* (both also released in 2016) in helping to kickstart the live-service revolution. In our reality, Respawn went on to give the community what they had been craving in the form of a fully formed story campaign. A sequel to a multiplayer-only title receiving an offline story mode was unusual — the expected franchise evolution in reverse — yet the results hit the mark.

Much has already been said about Effect And Cause, unquestionably the highlight of *Titanfall 2*'s campaign. Although bouncing between two timelines in the same environment feels like an ingenious technical achievement — and, more importantly, is great fun — it would be unfair to allow it to overshadow everything else the campaign has to offer.

The wallrun mechanic enables Respawn to offer players movement with more speed and athleticism than *Call Of Duty* ever allowed. As a consequence, it regularly proves compulsory for progress, with a convenient number of stretches featuring walls positioned *just* the right distance from one another. Importantly, a playful attitude to level design prevents it from feeling rote, notably in the form of Into The Abyss and the dynamic, twisting elements of its oversized factory environment.

Stepping into the shoes of a wallrunning, double-jumping Pilot pushes thoughts of Infinity Ward out of your head. It's when jumping into the seat of your Titan, however, that the *Call Of Duty* heritage can be felt, the heft of your steady steps and an inability to lift both feet from the ground at once oddly familiar. It's not much of a power trip when facing off against a group of enemies also in Titans, but crushing troops beneath your hulking metal feet never gets old.

The first game's attempts to meld storytelling with PvP made meaningful bonds with characters impossible. Free from the constraints of the multiplayer cycle — and against all odds — the sequel ensures that your character's Titan, BT-7274 (BT for short), becomes a character that many players remember warmly long after the credits roll. Glenn Steinbaum's delivery is suitably monotone, yet the writing and performance contain flecks of personality that glitter. Thanks to the pacing and level of control that only an offline, singleplayer experience can provide, Respawn made BT feel like a friend, despite its appearance as a literal faceless automaton.

Which isn't to say that the multiplayer side of *Titanfall 2* was ignored. Far from it. In 2025, its title screen feels like a graveyard of ambition, almost a blueprint for the live-service landing pages we see everywhere today. "Operation Endeavor patch is now live!" it cries, as it has since 2017. Links to ►

weapon skins for purchase, a news feed and a YouTube video by 'Rendy Gaming' also sit sullenly frozen in time.

Before the updates stopped abruptly, a year after release, for a while it seemed that *Titanfall 2* might embrace the nascent live-service model. New maps, modes, cosmetics, weapons and even an additional Titan were introduced across six updates with names such as Angel City's Most Wanted and Monarch's Reign. All of these additions were introduced for free, honouring a pre-launch commitment perhaps later regretted by publisher EA's bean counters.

There's plenty in *Titanfall 2* that seems to foreshadow elements that are ubiquitous in the gaming landscape today, but the game never went full live service. At best, it was a dry run for the model used for *Apex Legends*, Respawn's free-to-play behemoth that takes



swerving the free-to-play model meant that there was an instant and at least somewhat predictable hit of revenue on release – the game's servers still function in 2025.

Fire up *Titanfall 2* today, and you can – eventually – still get a match online. Player counts are now in the hundreds rather than the thousands (crossplay has never been added), and matchmaking can take minutes rather than seconds, but there's never a day

The speed and agility afforded to players outside of a Titan makes identifying them easy, and taking them down difficult

IF IT HAD TRANSITIONED TO THE MODERN WAY, BY NOW ITS FUNDAMENTALS WOULD HAVE BEEN SHUFFLED MANY TIMES OVER

place within the *Titanfall* universe, but without the wallrunning (or, indeed, the Titans). As popular as *Apex Legends* might be, though, it might be actively resented by anyone dreaming of *Titanfall 3*. There's no denying that its hunger for resources is what killed ongoing *Titanfall 2* support, and no doubt contributed to the reported scrapping of a fully fledged *Titanfall* sequel.

Although the second instalment's failure to embrace the blossoming trend of live service led Respawn and EA to abandon it relatively quickly, to some extent it's this failure that keeps the game alive. By now, we're familiar with how quickly and brutally a failed service game can be put to sleep. However, since *Titanfall 2*'s existence was never entirely dependent on a long-term and consistently high level of income – and

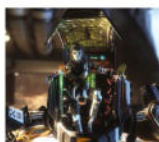
on which no one is playing. Once you find yourself in a match, you're quickly reminded of the reasons why *Titanfall 2* is so beloved, and why so many people feel so sore at the game's abandonment.

There are modes that lock you in or out of mechs, but *Titanfall 2* online is at its best when everybody's racing to beef up their score in order to earn their next Titan, while doing their best to take down or avoid those called in by the enemy. Speed and aggressiveness is thus encouraged, so you might find yourself taken out with a rifle by a Pilot wallrunning a few dozen feet above you, or you might take someone by surprise while sliding around a corner.

The core mode is Attrition, both teams battling to reach the score limit first by scoring kills on a combination of Pilots, Titans and AI soldiers and robotics. If you



Unlike the Titans in multiplayer, BT can hold a conversation, and feels more like a friend than a tool as a consequence



LEGENDS NEVER DIE

Apex Legends may take place within the *Titanfall* universe, and directly lifts many elements from those games, but it's curious what was taken and what was left behind. Almost all of the weapons made the transition, for example. Guns such as the EVA-8 shotgun and the L-STAR energy LMG will still feel familiar today to anyone who comes to *Titanfall 2* immediately after an *Apex* session. Wildlife seen in the campaign is retained as well, Prowlers a danger in certain areas while Flyers will drop boxes of loot when coming under sustained fire. There are no signs of the Titans in *Apex* (although there's plenty of falling), but one of the antagonists, Ash, crossed over as an NPC and announcer before finally becoming a playable character in season 11.

A severely damaged Titan is vulnerable to a finishing move from another mech, although it remains deadly to any Pilots in the area



AI troops prevent the large multiplayer maps from feeling empty, and serve as cannon fodder for teams to nudge up their scores

find that your team has lost, it's not quite over yet: respawns are disabled, but a (destructible) escape ship is on the way for you to try to reach.

How to maintain the power fantasy of stomping around in a huge and heavily armed mech while ensuring that these enormous machines aren't untouchable, consistently obliterating every Pilot in sight? Respawn's answer is twofold. First, intricate maps that have open spaces for the Titans to move around in but also plenty of scenery and buildings that offer cover and hiding spaces for the Pilots. Second, effective ways for the Pilots to chip away at the health of the Titans. In addition to the rodeo mechanic — which sees you jump atop a Titan to deal a small amount of guaranteed damage, providing you're not taken out before the animation is finished — a

selection of dedicated anti-Titan weapons can slowly but surely eat away at their health. It's not just other Titans they need to watch out for, then.

Several changes were made from the first game, introducing a general sense that the Titans had become slightly more vulnerable, in part due to abandoning shield regeneration. This tightens the Pilot/Titan balance: now, spotting an enemy Titan while you're still waiting for your own can be seen as an opportunity to attack rather than an unwelcome heave in the flow of your game. It's a balance that still isn't quite perfect — and perhaps never could be, given the nature of the pieces at play — but it's surely far better than the alternative.

And it's not just the title screen that remains frozen in time: more or less every aspect of gameplay balance remains as it was on launch day. If *Titanfall 2* had transitioned to the modern way of videogame production, by now its fundamentals would have been prodded, poked, remixed and shuffled many times over, sometimes as a result of the whims of the team (and possibly execs sitting several layers away from day-to-day production), and sometimes in response to the wails of the loudest minority of the community. A Ship Of Theseus approach to game development doesn't always work, and has arguably contributed to the death of initially promising games such as *Lawbreakers*. *Titanfall 2* may be barely clinging on to life, but it is still most definitely *Titanfall 2*. ■





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T H E L O N G G A M E

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



Hitman: World Of Assassination

Developer/publisher IO Interactive Format PC, PS4, PS5, PSVR, PSVR2, Switch, Switch 2, Xbox One, Xbox Series Original release 2021

When your job is bumping off terrible people with too much money and power, you'll never be short of work. Indeed, Agent 47 has been kept busy for the best part of a decade now, first by a trilogy's worth of oligarchs and gunrunners, and then a regular supply of Elusive Targets, including celebrities. That's the case with *Hitman*'s latest time-limited mission, which returns IO to where it all began while also gesturing forward. We're back in Paris, the Palais that hosted 2016's fashion show now redressed as a casino featuring Mads Mikkelsen's *Le Chiffre*.

Following the main Mission Story thread here is a glimpse of how *First Light*'s Bond might operate, a streamlined, cinematic take on 47's usual kills offering extra facetime with your target and a narrative twist that disrupts your plans. Of course, if you don't fancy playing poker against a monologuing Mikkelsen, you can just shimmy up a drainpipe and shoot him in the head. This is *Hitman*'s secret weapon: its flexibility. This applies to your chosen manner of murder, of course, but also IO's willingness to contort its winning formula into new shapes. Fire up *Hitman* today and you'll find everything from user-created challenges to a sniper-based shooting gallery and, in *Freelancer*, an expansive Roguelike — all of them available to be

played from inside a VR headset or during the morning commute. At least, in theory.

After dabbling in VR at *Hitman 3*'s PS4 launch, a commendable effort that strained the ageing hardware to its limits, subsequent PCVR and Meta Quest versions felt like backward steps. Imagine our relief, then, at this year's PSVR2 edition, delivering some of the finest environments we've ever experienced in VR, and freeing us from PSVR's DualShock-based controls. Physically reaching out two hands to choke a guard has a certain guilty thrill, and if the clumsiness of motion controls steers us away from precision stealth, the weapon handling — aided by laser sights and supporting dual wielding for the first time — makes *Hitman* a more viable action game than ever before.

Progress made here cannot, alas, be carried over to the Switch 2 version. It's an exciting prospect, having *World Of Assassination* in your pocket, without the original Switch's cloud-based solution, but one undone by the game's always-online requirement. You can play (some modes) on the bus, but those saves won't be valid once you get home to an Internet connection, sapping our enthusiasm for the mission at hand. Adaptable as he may have proved over the years, then, even Agent 47 can't blend in absolutely everywhere. ■



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