



XBOX



THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

GEARS OF WAR 4
EVEN THE WIND IS TRYING TO KILL YOU ON XBOX ONE

THE FUTURE OF XBOX ONE
COULD THE NEXT GEN ALREADY BE HERE?

DOOM

HOW AN OLD SCHOOL LEGEND IS FIGHTING TO TAKE BACK THE FPS CROWN

Future



QUANTUM BREAK
REVIEWED! MOVE OVER MAX PAYNE



LEGO STAR WARS
NEW TRILOGY SECRETS REVEALED



HITMAN REVIEWED
WHY AGENT 47 IS ON KILLER FORM



FUTURE OF FORZA
THE PC TECH SHAPING THE SERIES

Microsoft

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Update complete



■ Matt Castle
Editor

Some readers actually wrote in complaining about Matthew's old editor's pic. "Grinning buffoon" wrote one. He'll never smile again.

Typical. You spend months remaking your mag to better reflect the current Xbox scene, only for Phil Spencer to shift the goalposts. His vision for Xbox One's future is bold – looking to the mobile market's upgrade culture for inspiration and, in the process, ensuring your game collection never grows obsolete. This idea fuels your new-look mag, too. As well as giving you the best access to the hits of tomorrow, OXM believes that games only really become interesting once they're on your hard drive. Our new Extra section keeps the discussion going long after a game is out, while Insider sees devs reveal the stories behind their incredible creations. And what game more incredible to kick off with than *Doom*? Giant guns and even giant-er demons to shoot them at. Wherever the goalposts may lie, some things are timeless.

O X M C O N T R I B U T O R S



■ Alex Dale
Deputy editor
 Alex spent most of the month exploring every murderous avenue in *Hitman*. He played so much, in fact, that even IO were feeling a little worried for him.



■ Tom Stone
Staff writer
 Tom became public enemy number one after dropping some brutal *Quantum Break* spoilers. We Quantum Broke his face through the nearest desk.



■ Edwin Evans-Thirlwell
Contributor
 Edwin quizzed Xbox's top brass for a feature. The top brass quizzed him right back: "What's with that name? You some kind of baron?"



■ Chris Schilling
Contributor
 Look into those eyes. They are the eyes of a man driven half-mad by pursuing shiny gold medals in *Trackmania*. Game sent him round the bend (literally).



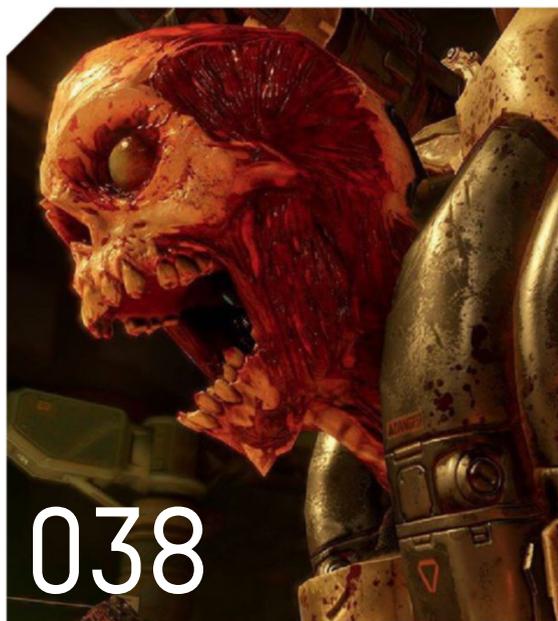
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—> HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY? WHY NOT WRITE TO TEAM OXM AT OXM@FUTURENET.COM

insider



We had hoped to kick off our new Insider section with happier news. Instead, Agent 47 has been overshadowed by a more corporate assassin, with the untimely death of **Lionhead Studios** (p10). The Fable outfit brought us many years of happiness (and farts) in their lively antidote to the dour RPG scene, so let's take a moment to celebrate them. *Fable Legends* may have been canceled, but maybe Albion's legacy will live on in **Killer Instinct** (p14). Iron Galaxy's scrapper is rapidly turning into Xbox's answer to Nintendo's Smash Bros. One game that definitely won't be appearing on the roster is **Forza** (p20) – not just because the notion of Fulgore kicking the face off a 1963 Volkswagen Beetle is dumb, but because Turn 10 are far too busy pushing cutting-edge car tech to get distracted. Technology is also at the heart of **Gears of War 4** (p16) which, after eight months of post-E3 hush, finally begins to peek out from behind cover. The big news? This time, even the wind is out to kill you. Whether you're a virtual soldier or a human developer: stay safe.



010



014



016



020



Never mind the gun - 47's death stare alone is enough to kill a man. Look away now if you want to see the end of this mag.





END OF
ALBION

The lion sleeps tonight

In the wake of *Fable Legends*' cancellation and Lionhead Studios' proposed closure, we celebrate one of gaming's most eccentric developers



LIONHEAD
STUDIOS

BELOW With its eccentric Britishisms and toilet humor, *Fable* was a welcome antidote to stuffy RPGs.



Making videogames is a high-cost, high-risk industry, and sadly studios going out of business is a common occurrence – both big and small. In the last decade, we've lost names such as Bizarre Creations (*Project Gotham Racing*), Eden Games (*Test Drive Unlimited*), Neversoft (*Tony Hawk*), Rockstar Vancouver (*Bully*) and more besides. But as gutting as those closures were, it's been a long time since something properly wined us like the recently announced demise of the storied old studio that brought us the *Fable* series, Lionhead.

It's not 100% official of course; at time of going to press, Microsoft are merely 'in discussions' about a proposed closure, as part of a downsizing of their European operations that also sees *Kalimba* developers Press Play caught in the crossfire. However, this appears to be little more than a legal technicality. With current project *Fable Legends* canned, and with employees in talks about re-deployment across Microsoft's portfolio, it seems time has run out for this cornerstone of the British games development scene.

With the loss of Lionhead, it feels gaming has lost something intangible; a small sense of hope, of wonder. That might sound melodramatic, and if you want to be cold and logical about it, perhaps it is. Lionhead's output has never really reflected the high esteem the industry holds it in,

with 2008's *Fable II* being the studio's only undisputed critical hit. Indeed, although Lionhead's games were largely warmly received, they had a reputation for over-promising and under-delivering (*Black & White*, *Fable I*), or not being delivered at all (the famous *Project Milo*, unveiled during the Kinect launch at E3 2009, which allowed players to interact with an adaptive AI that learned from you).

From out of the Frog

But then, that was all part of the charm of this unique studio, where dreams were allowed to take precedence over bottom lines. And what else could have we expected from a studio led by gaming's ultimate dreamer, Peter Molyneux? Founded in 1996, Lionhead was seen as the spiritual successor to Bullfrog Productions, an influential studio formed in 1987 by Molyneux and Les Edgar (who is now the chairman of TVR, motor fans). Bullfrog's crowning achievement was effectively inventing the 'god game' with *Populous* and *Powermonger*, a genre that allowed you to control the fates of little computer people and bend the world to your whims. It was the kind of game that could only have come from a mind like Molyneux's; one that hoped for something bigger and better from videogames. One, you might say, that wanted to play god.

Following Bullfrog's acquisition by Electronic Arts in 1995 (the studio



ABOVE Both *Black & White* and *Milo and Kate* dreamed of AI characters that could learn from the player.



ABOVE Peter Molyneux co-founded Bullfrog in 1987, then Lionhead in 1996, and joined 22Cans in 2012.

→ would close just six years later), Molyneux founded Lionhead Studios to carry on Bullfrog's free-spirited tradition. Ted Timmins, who worked at Lionhead from 2004 to 2014 and was lead designer on the Xbox 360 remake *Fable Anniversary*, describes the atmosphere within the studio as being one that harbored creativity: "There was a very liberal approach to the game design. I don't recall hearing 'that's impossible!' at any point during my 10 years there. It felt like every idea was embraced."

Early on in its life, Lionhead set up partnerships with numerous small studios who became 'satellites' – remaining independent but having access to Lionhead's marketing and creative heft. While some of these projects, such as Intrepid Computer Entertainment's ambitious evolution sim *BC*, never bore fruit, a collaboration with Big Blue Box, a studio founded by brothers Dene and Simon Carter, did lead to the birth of Project Ego – that later became *Fable*.

"We had engine coders helping with the UI and designers doing the sound"

Dene describes Lionhead's input as "Here. Have some rope to hang yourself with!" It's one of the only places I've worked where if someone said 'I can do an awesome thing!' they were given license to do so. As a result, we had engine coders helping with the UI design, artists suggesting lore, and designers helping out with sound design. People weren't just invested in their little area, but in every aspect of the game. There was no 'I created the untextured mesh for Godzilla's big toe' segmentation. Being associated with Lionhead

meant we had some amazing applicants. Without this help we'd have just been another struggling indie developer nobody had heard of.

"I think that if you asked Peter or [co-founder] Mark Webley, they'd say the satellite scheme was, technically, a failure. It didn't do what it set out to do, which was to create a fully independent suite of studios. *Fable's* ambition was far too large for that. Indeed, we were actively encouraged to expand that ambition, to push ever further, even if it seemed impossible."

This enthusiasm often gave Lionhead as much grief as reward. The original *Fable* will likely forever be associated with Molyneux's claim that you'd be able to plant an acorn and watch it grow into a tree. No such thing could literally occur in the final release, which drew criticism, but the game delivered on creating an RPG in which you gained a sense that time was passing and you were making a mark on the world. Such under-appreciation was par for the

OXM
SAY



▶ **Powermonger Castle**

"*Fable II* is the most British of games, certainly the only RPG in which you can run up to a stranger's house in the middle of the night, rouse them with a rat-a-tat-tat, and soil your breeches the moment the owner opens the door. Thanks Lionhead!"



▶ **Dungeon Keeper Dale**

"Every Bullfrog title was wonderful in its own way – from the deceptively sinister entrepreneurship of *Theme Park*, to the amoral strategizing of *Syndicate*. Even *Flood*, a bog-standard platformer, saw its hero run down by a car at the end."



▶ **Magic Carpet Stone**

"To whet appetites for *Fable II*, Lionhead gave us *Pub Games*: card, roulette and slot games which let you win currency for the upcoming RPG. Who else would make something so low-key to get people hyped for an epic RPG?"



course for a studio that noisily shot for the moon, and then raised critical ire when their games merely landed at the top of a mountain.

Weird games

Lionhead's first Xbox 360 title, *Fable II*, was the game that finally saw the studio tie their potential together. "It felt like the shackles of the prior generation were finally free, and games were beginning to explore big open worlds with brand new systems," Timmins reminisces. But yet, Lionhead were unable to capitalize on their success in the RPG genre, as the team were pushed in different creative directions. "*Fable* was a weird game in an expensive, slow-turnaround genre," says Carter. "There was a sense that we couldn't take four years to make a new game each time. With *The Witcher* and *Skyrim* proving RPGs' popularity, it's easy to say 'wrong!' But at the time it looked like that route was going to be terrible for studio longevity."

As such, Lionhead evolved into a breeding ground for ideas for new tech, including Kinect (*Fable: The Journey*) and Windows 10/Xbox One cross-play (the doomed



Fable Legends) – a time period that dovetailed with many senior members of the studio, including Timmins, Carter and Molyneux himself, leaving Lionhead. As bottom lines began to take precedence over dreams, Lionhead's roar quietened. Yet it is still a shock to see this grand, iconic studio silenced for good.

Fable will no doubt live on, and so will Lionhead's legacy – almost every top talent in the British gaming

industry has passed through its doors, and Guildford, the city the studio is based, is now a hotbed of development, hosting Media Molecule, Hello Games, Ghost Games UK and many other phoenix studios. But right now, we'll allow ourselves a moment's repose for a bold studio that dared to be different. **OXM**

[The backward compatible Fables II and III are available on Xbox Store](#)

ABOVE We'd been on the *Fable Legends* beta for several months. A shame no one else will get to play it. *Blubs*

BELOW Why, it's that tree-goat character you know and love.



→ SHARE YOUR FONDEST LIONHEAD STUDIOS MEMORIES AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK

COMBAT
EVOLVED

C-C-Carbine breaker



How Iron Galaxy turned Halo 2's Sangheili star into a credible pugilist



The Arbiter is among the few who could outdraw Master Chief in a high noon duel, but he had to earn his

place in *Killer Instinct's* line-up like any greenhorn. "One thing we take a lot of pride in is that every character has to have a real reason to exist," Iron Galaxy's CEO David Lang observes. "With *Street Fighter IV*, there's not that much difference between Ryu and Ken and Dan – they're all kind of the same. We make sure every character in *Killer Instinct* has unique mechanics, and that's true of the Arbiter as well."

Billed as an "amalgam" of Arbiters from throughout the Halo chronology, *Killer Instinct Season 3's* variation transplants an entire moveset from one genre to another without, somehow, totally breaking it. Many of Halo's signature abilities and, indeed control inputs map over directly to *Killer Instinct* – left bumper throws a sticky grenade, and right trigger fires

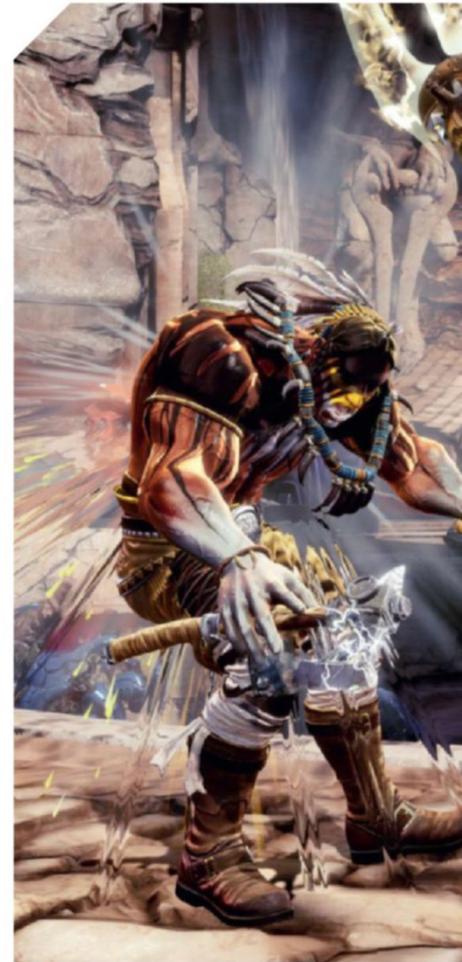
the Arbiter's trusty Covenant Carbine. He even has a cloaking device for extra-underhand beatdowns, and an overshield that acts as an extra health bar. "It was really fun to take the Halo tools, all these iconic weapons, and bring it into *KI* in a way that makes sense for a fighting game," says Lang.

"It was fun bringing Halo's weapons into a fighting game"

There has, needless to say, been a lot of back-and-forth with Halo masterminds 343 Industries. "It was interesting tracking down stuff that we both thought would work. It was definitely a process, but I think we ended up in the best possible place. Originally, we weren't sure about him using the Carbine. Is that too much? Because it sounds like he's got a lot

RIGHT If you're not careful, a sticky grenade can harm the Arbiter as well as his foe.

BELOW Once the Carbine's 18 shots have been used, they're gone for the rest of the match.



of tools – how do you balance that out? But working with 343 closely helped us to nail the look, and design a Halo combatant for *Killer Instinct* that made sense."

The Arbiter isn't the only seasoned battler in *Season 3's* cast – he's joined by Rare antique Rash from *Battletoads*. So will we see more in the way of *KI* cameos for famous Xbox faces? "There's going to be more of this kind of stuff," hints Lang. "But we haven't announced anything yet." **OXM**

OXM
SAY

▶ Matthew Castle

"Dream *KI* cameo? The Agent from *Crackdown* could start scraps relatively weak, but by bashing ability orbs out of his opponent he'd level into an unstoppable tank. Could be the ultimate risk/reward character. Or plain terrible. One of the two."



▶ Alex Dale

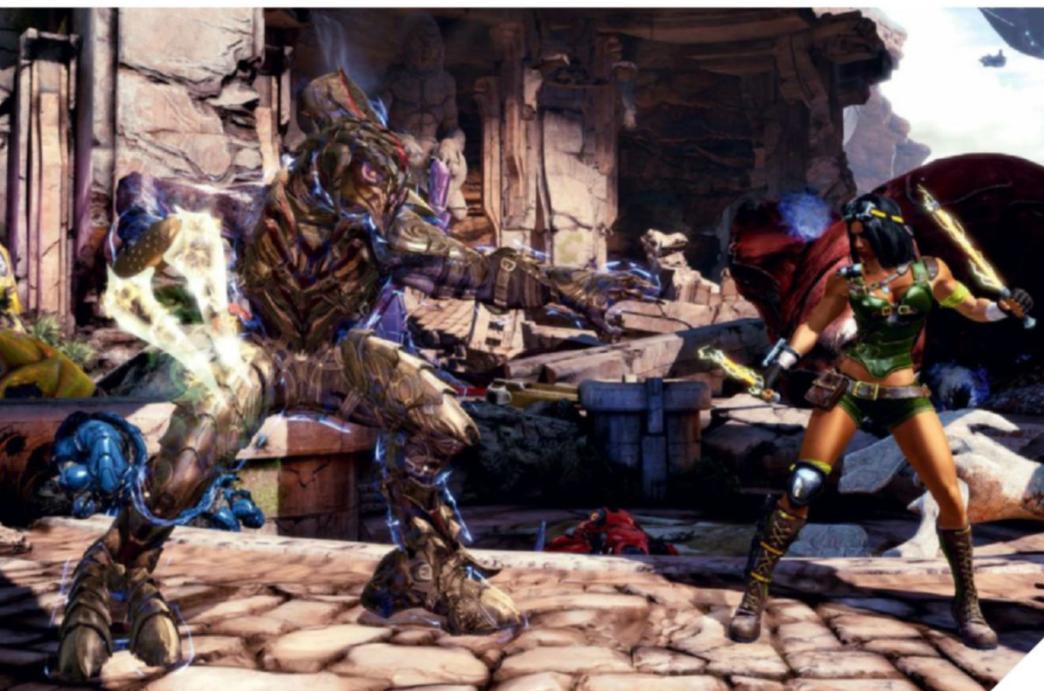
"*Gears'* Marcus Fenix is a good fit, not just aesthetically, but in terms of the fun you can have modifying his moveset for a fighting game. His 'roadie run' sprint's a multi-hit juggling technique waiting to happen."



▶ Tom Stone

"Jack Joyce from *Quantum Break's* time powers could be used for ultra-slow-mo punches, turning *KI* into the *Viewtiful Joe* reboot the world (me) is crying out for. Or cheat by rewinding time until your opponent concedes out of disgust."

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PLAY/EJECT

THE THINGS PUSHING OUR BUTTON (OR NOT)



The Division

Wish it could be Christmas every day? *The Division* has you covered. Er, as long as you don't mind corpses under the tree.



Hitman's prologue

Picking off actors in recreations of historical hits is not only conceptually brilliant, but shows IO's level design at its focused best.



Fable II

OXM honor the mighty Lionhead with a trip down memory lane. It's strewn with dead chickens and dubious odors.



Quantum Break's TV bits

Turns out Remedy's revolutionary storytelling idea is... longer cutscenes. Hideo Kojima got there first, guys.



Hitman's menial workers

Yes, it's a game about taking down monsters of the elite, but must the path be paved with the bodies of waiters and janitors?



Press Play closes

The Danish outfit wasn't as well known as Lionhead, but with their death goes any chance of *Kalimba 2*. Hoebear, we salute you.

OLD COG
NEW
TRICKS



Need to know

One page, all the facts. This month, a legendary shooter returns: [Gears of War 4](#)

1 THE ACTION IS SET 25 YEARS AFTER GEARS OF WAR 3

It's been a pretty calm quarter-century since the events of *Gears 3*. Okay, humanity has dwindled to a few hundred thousand, but that's a few hundred thousand who don't live in fear of chainsaw beheadings. The survivors hunker down in walled cities under the watchful eye of the Coalition of Ordered Governments; those who oppose the overprotective COG join a rival faction, the Outsiders (guess where they live). These grotty dissidents live to raid COG settlements – it turns out that *Gears 3*'s imulsion bomb nuked fossil fuel reserves along with the Locust – but we'll take coal burglars over giant city-sinking worms.

2 YOU WILL PLAY AS MARCUS FENIX'S SON

The burly star of last year's E3 demo is JD Fenix: quick to climb the COG ranks (less of a pain than his old man), but now AWOL under mysterious circumstances. JD is joined by Delmont 'Del' Walker, a childhood friend so loyal, he also joined the COG and went AWOL. Wonder what he'd do if JD jumped off a cliff. They've both sought asylum in an Outsider village, where they meet *Gears 4*'s third protagonist, Kait, daughter of the Outsiders' leader.

3 THE LOCUST ARE DEAD. LONG LIVE THE SWARM

With the Locust reduced to a meaty paste, *Gears* needs a new threat to empty bullets into. Enter the Juvies. These pale pod people are gooey, dead-eyed melee brawlers, who focus on hounding you out of



cover and are deadly in large numbers. Juvies can evolve into Drones, their skin becoming tougher and their intelligence increasing so they can use weapons. These are the first of the Swarm, *Gears 4*'s new threat.

4 NEW WEAPONS ARE A REAL BUZZKILL (BUT IN A GOOD WAY)

Due to the 25 years of peace, the COG haven't built any new weapons, which is pretty stupid considering what happened 26 years ago. Luckily, construction equipment can be adapted. The Dropshot fires explosive charges attached to drills, making it perfect for clearing out enemies hiding in cover. The Buzzkill sounds fun, too – a 'tool' that fires circular sawblades which ricochet round the environment until they find someone's neck. Just fire with caution, as the spinning blades will

happily settle for yours. Should both these fail, reach for the Combat Knife, powering some brutal melee kills.

5 MOTHER NATURE IS OUT TO GET YOU

Thanks to *Gears 3*'s imulsion bomb, Sera's ecosystem is constantly ravaged by devastating storms. Gale-force winds can send bullets flying off course, projectiles either flying much further ahead or rebounding into the one who pulled the pin. The trick is to use hostile conditions to your advantage, like shooting out supports so the wind sends machinery flying into Juvies. The Swarm could be the least of your worries when you're darting through more advanced storms, though, as searing lightning strikes will frazzle anyone who gets in their way.

6 COVER WILL BE MORE DYNAMIC

Storms will change the environment layouts, but so can you. Hanging Swarm pods can be shot down, either to crush other enemies or to be used as fresh cover. Though you're always at risk of them hatching a Jovie for a surprise attack.

7 IT REMEMBERS WHAT MAKES GEARS GREAT

Take note Master Chief: the two-player co-op campaign can be played both online and (yes!) offline. With the story set over one 24 hour period, the worst day of JD's life is looking to be the shooter highlight of our year. **OXM**

ABOVE The game's 'weaponized football' look hasn't changed.



For more on *Gears of War 4* read next month's cover story. Issue out 24 May

→ FOR THE LATEST GEARS OF WAR 4 DETAILS CHECK OUT WWW.GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM



DEAD
BY THE
MED

Bazaar creations

Creative director [Christian Elverdam](#) talks us through Agent 47's Morocco murder mission

You've read our thoughts on the initial *Hitman* intro pack on page 64 (unless you're a stickler for reading magazines in order, which we can respect) – now the attention turns to what's next for everyone's favorite globetrotting garrote-merchant.

'Season One' consists of an additional five storyline missions, priced at \$10 each if you buy them separately. The first such excursion, set in the sleepy (and fictional) coastal town of Sapienza, Italy, should be out by the time you read this. Looking further ahead, we were recently invited to take a sneak peek at *Hitman*'s third mission, due in May, which sets our favorite bald-headed butcher down in the middle of the bustling bazaar markets of Marrakesh, Morocco.

"Exotic yet contemporary" is how creative director Christian Elverdam describes the setting. "Our environmental artists just fell in love with the whole vibe of the city, and the contrast of the skyscrapers in the background and the old feel of the market. Culturally it's super-interesting".

It's impossible to disagree with that assessment as we watch Agent 47 scurry through a web of cramped, mud brick back alleys, before clambering through a distinctively north-African arched doorway to an open rooftop, which gives us a



ABOVE Christian Elverdam smiles on the outside, plots terrible murders inside.

fantastic view of the congested outdoor market below.

"When we write the story, we do it in a way in which the targets aren't necessarily tied to a place, then we pitch different locations," explains Elverdam. "In this case, we wanted to run with the theme of an assassination that takes place during a military coup. That can take place in a lot of different settings around the world, but we got inspired by the idea of portraying a civilized African setting, because most of the time the region is represented only as warzones."

Sure enough, looking past the market, we see a rowdy crowd storming a cold, sterile-looking

building on the horizon as helicopters buzz angrily overhead. It's the Swedish consulate, which is currently harboring a banker who has ripped off the Moroccan people. It's a level of two distinct parts – of suffocating crowds and rustic alleys on the outside, and of sparsely-guarded open-plan offices once you get inside. Elverdam tells us that future maps will vary the number of people you have to plan your murders around. Some will be filled with onlookers, like Paris, others lazy and 'uncrowded', like Sapienza. Here, in Marrakesh, you get both in one intriguing map. **OXM**

[Hitman: Intro Pack and the Full Experience](#) are on the Xbox Store



THE
BIG
PICTURE

On the verge of greatness

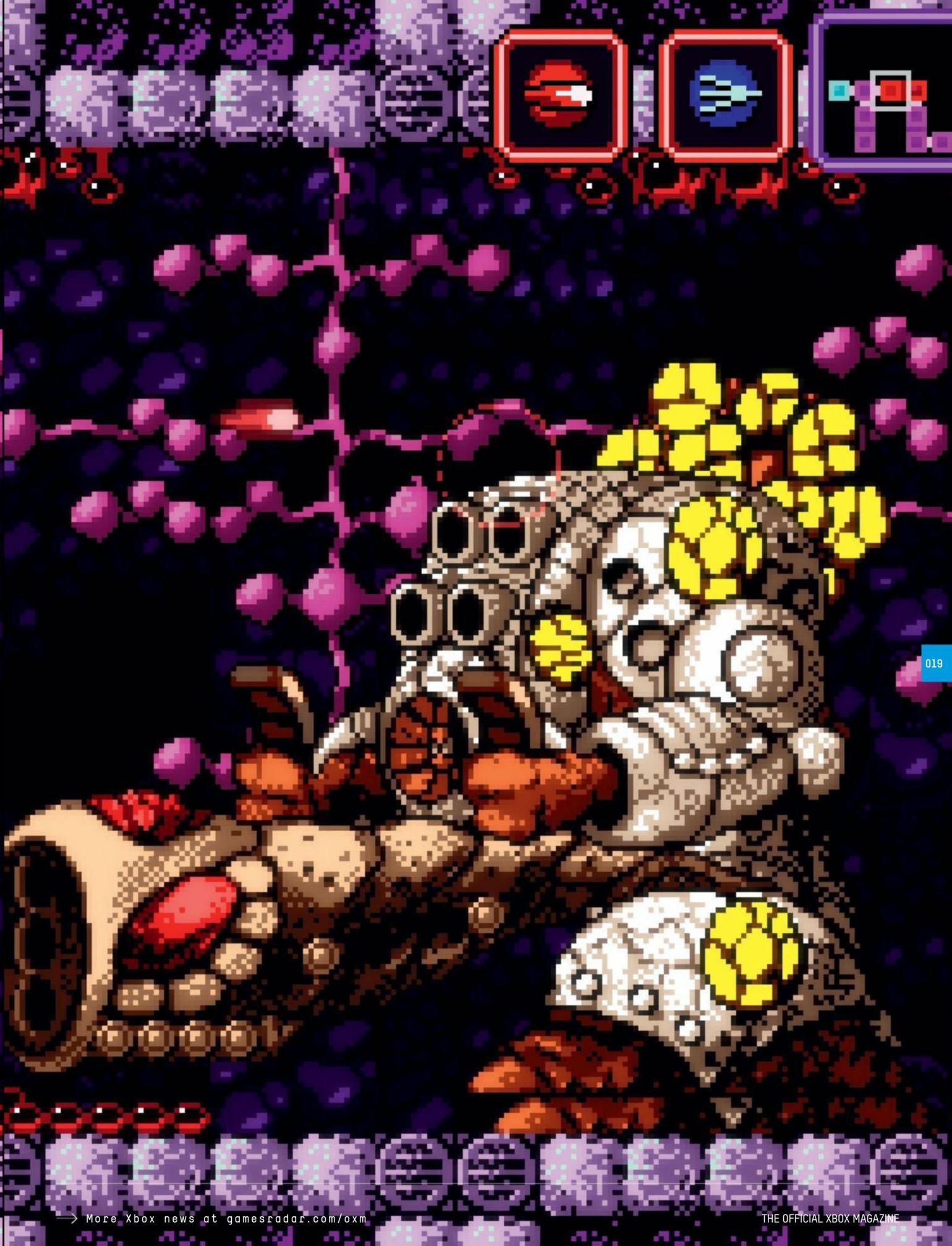
Axiom Verge explodes onto Xbox One

If you're a fan of 'Metroidvanias' – in which a huge world gradually reveals itself as you acquire new abilities and gear – then this issue must feel like grabbing the master key. Not only do we have a review of a stunning remaster – *Shadow Complex* (p73) – but we're also bringing you news that one of 2015's more charming platformers is heading to Xbox One.

Previously seen on PS4 and PC, *Axiom Verge* casts you as a scientist called Trace who botches up a lab experiment then wakes up in an

alien world garnished in garish, 1980s pixelated décor. Escaping this too-purple hellhole is a matter of collecting artifacts that allow you to manipulate the environment – remote-detonating bullets that can be used to hit switches, a disruptor switch that causes platforms to 'glitch' in and out of existence. Despite the retro facade, the clever environmental puzzles are resolutely modern – although the enormous, screen-sized bosses are another nod to the eighties. Check this bruiser out! OXM

RIGHT Telal is heavily-armored, but about as mobile as an oak tree. Those gross pulsating yellow... things on his back are his weak points.

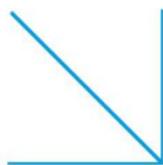




NO FREE RIDES?

Generation Apex

What the release of Forza 6 on PC means for Forza on Xbox One



On paper the release of *Forza Motorsport 6 Apex* means little for gamers on Xbox One – it's a multiplayer-less

free PC version of a game you probably already own, thrown together to serve as a centerpiece for the youthful Windows 10 store. But it's also an indication of where Turn 10 are taking the Forza series in general.

For starters, this is the first Forza game to run on DirectX 12, the latest and most powerful version of Microsoft's industry-standard graphics toolset, and everything Turn 10 have learned during development may transfer to future games on console. "This is moving our entire engine, Drivatars and everything, to DirectX 12," says studio head Dan Greenawalt. "And the *Apex* code will move to DirectX 12.X, which is the console version of DirectX 12. So this is a stepping stone toward having all of the technology that you see here able to run on Xbox One in future titles." He adds that "nothing makes your code better than shipping a game" – the more games you release, the more robust the engine they run on.

Greenawalt insists that releasing *Apex* for free "isn't a big statement" about the future of Forza. "As a first-party studio, we could do it and we wanted to make a gift to Windows 10 gamers." Still, it's very likely that *Forza 7* will learn from how *Apex* restructures *Forza 6*'s cavernous offering to suit a player that doesn't

feel compelled to get their money's worth, without compromising on the depth of the racing itself. The flow of the new version is split between Tours, themed one-off events from the history of motorsports with sizzling intro cinematics, and spotlight races that will be added to the package after release.

It's a punchier way of handling the material that minimizes time spent in menus and should keep players coming back, month on month. "The way this is designed, it's really just a fun, curated experience – it's so

"It's a stepping stone toward having this tech running on Xbox One in future"

different for Forza, which is so giant," says Greenawalt. "It couples really nicely with being free."

The addition of mid-race bonus objectives is in keeping with this desire to engage people quickly, then give them a reason to keep coming back to the game in the weeks to come. These range from making five perfect passes – no small feat when you're piloting an impetuous Lamborghini through a mob of lumpy Fiats – to making do without traction control while driving a high-horsepower car in wet conditions.

RIGHT Thought Forza's cars couldn't get any shinier? They can when they're rendered in 4k.

BELOW New cars include this Audi R18 and classics such as the 1973 Pontiac Firebird.



hard drive

Forza 5 launched with Drivatars – self-tutoring AIs who "live" in the cloud and carry over to new games. The oldest are terrifyingly adept. "They'll block a lane so I go to an outside, and then they'll block that one and go around the outside," says Dan Greenawalt. "That's a really complex behavior that you'd see in real racing, and we didn't program for that – they learned by watching people."

The idea isn't just to challenge, says design director Andy Beaudoin, but to teach players about racecraft without slowing the pace in the form of an actual tutorial. "When you're ready, you can try these things. It's less of a 'lesson', more an opportunity to refine your skills over time."

Apex may seem a sideshow, but you'd be foolish to ignore the implications for the Forza series in general, both technical and in terms of the design. As head of Xbox Phil Spencer concludes, "clearly we'll look at what works with *Apex*, what feedback we get, and we'll think about that on both platforms." This isn't *Forza 7*, in other words, but a good indicator of where it's heading. **OXM**

Is your engine revving for more? *Forza 6*'s Porsche DLC is rated on page 77.

→ BET YOU'VE GOT A HOT TAKE ON THIS. SHARE IT AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK



HOT TOPIC

DO YOU SEE A FREE TO PLAY FUTURE ON XBOX?



If Microsoft truly want to make a dent and draw in subs then they need the TRUE FPS: *Halo 5*. It would entice more people to online and get more to buy the full game.

Ricky LoFrisco



Evolve could have charged for additional monsters, hunters and skins, and would have worked better.

Phil Rawcliffe



Make a *Gears of War* like *Planetside*. But multiplayer only, and with customizable COG soldier set up.

Cody Hernandez



Um... how about *Fable Legends*? [Sigh - Ed.]

Jay Fletcher



Star Wars Battlefront would be good F2P. I played the beta when it was free - it was an almost perfect ratio of cost to content.

Jake Kirk



Sunset Overdrive could be an obvious answer. Purchasing character items and weapons, with new PvP elements leaning toward competition.

Matthew Keplinger



Free to play means free to pray on users stupid enough to pay for garbage.

Wyatt Simoneau

Think you know better than Wyatt Simoneau? Weigh in at [facebook.com/oxmuk](https://www.facebook.com/oxmuk)

preview

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The games we want the most



Don't look into Lego Chewbacca's eyes over on the left. They're portals to Hell



Imagine becoming a true master of your craft only to jack it all in on a whim. That's kinda the story of stormtrooper-turned-rebel Finn in *The Force Awakens* (okay, it was less a whim, more 'got his pal's blood all over his face', but let's not argue semantics, okay?). One day he's marching about and struggling to work out which pair of identical trooper booties are his, and the next he's saving the galaxy. All this will be retold in **Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens** (p32). His career change is sure to be an inspiration to many of our previewed games this month. Take Gearbox, who, in **Battleborn** (p24) are leaving *Borderlands*' Pandora in an attempt to bring the wildly-popular online battle arena genre from PC to console. It's a risky proposition, but the studio know how to craft a hero or two. Heck, if they can make a star out of that trundling, wise-cracking trash can, Claptrap, they should work wonders with knife-wielding mushrooms and butlers armed with robo-owls. At least Gearbox get to tap into their vast shooter know-how. In **Pit People** (p30) the gang at The Behemoth are abandoning their button-mashing chaos for the polite realm of turn-based strategy. Will their valiant bid for pastures new see them crushed in a Kylo Ren death grip, or buddy up with cool guy Poe Dameron? Only time (and our preview) will tell.



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Battleborn

Battleborn

25 species and not a pacifist among them. That's a bleak vision of the future, Gearbox

Tom Stone

PUBLISHER 2K GAMES DEVELOPER GEARBOX SOFTWARE
FORMAT XBOX ONE DUE 3 MAY

Unique heroes. 25 of them. We've been dubious about that claim for a while now. Surely a dozen unique ones – max – then the same dozen flipped and given wacky haircuts? We're not accusing the creators of *Borderlands* of laziness, mind, just appealing to their common sense. Won't somebody please think of the balancing?

But after getting hands-on with all of *Battleborn*'s 25 heroes, we can confirm they're just as unique as we feared. New arrivals include Kleese, a mad scientist who opens energy rifts and fires mortars from the comfort of his battle throne. Then there's El Dragon, a pro wrestler (although we're pretty sure his cybernetic arms would be against WWE regulations). Taking us to 25 is Attikus, who's either a courageous civil rights lawyer or a hideous electric-shard-filled freak capable of knocking enemies back with a burst of shock damage. One

of the two. They join 22 others, all packing three special powers apiece. Considering at any time you could be struck by spells, gunfire, arrows, beefy wrestler punches, sword strikes, mechanical owl attacks and a whole lot more, we're impressed this FPS/MOBA/first-person brawler isn't the incoherent mess it really should be.

Level playing field

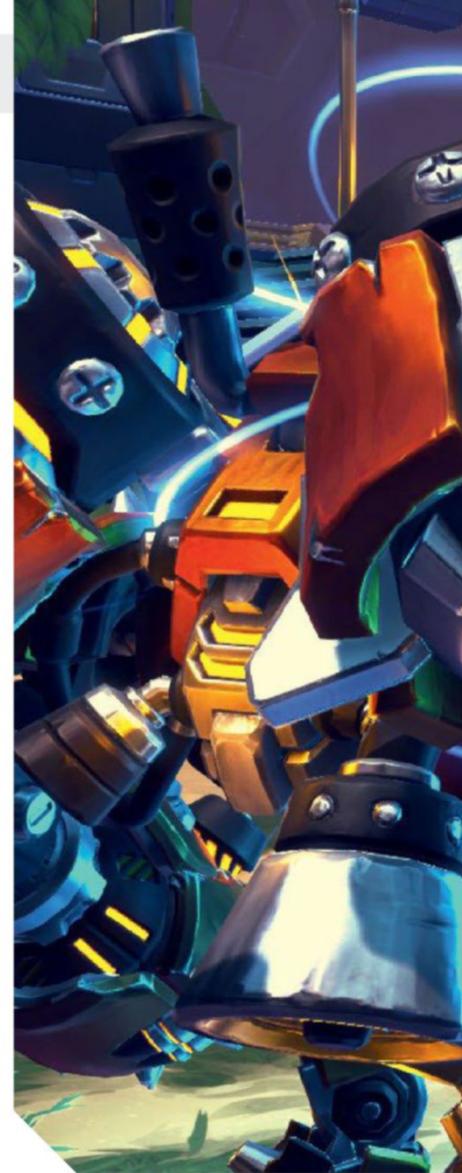
"It's always been about pulling all the toys out of the toy box and throwing them together," says creative director Randy Varnell, justifying *Battleborn*'s madly eclectic cast. But if *Battleborn* wants to avoid being thrown on the multiplayer scrapheap, all those toys are going to have to play nice with each other – something that Varnell and his team identified as a design priority. "We knew that balance was going to have to start with multiplayer, then trickle back into the campaign."

One clever balancing trick is the use of hero powers. The best are clearly designed to counter the inherent drawbacks of some character types.

"You could be struck by gunfire, wrestler punches, swords or spells at any time"

Ghalt's a hero whose core weapon is a shotgun. It's as useless as you'd expect from a long distance, so Ghalt has the power to hookshot his foes and yank them toward him. Then he can either welcome them with a shotgun blast to the temple, or drag them into traps that stun them before exploding. It's a tight balancing act: two fun powers that make a short-range shooter capable of holding his own against distant threats.

You're also never more than five minutes of competent battling away from leveling up, which grants a choice of two upgrades. These can be simple damage buffs and status effects, but can also change your entire play style. We find ourselves



grumbling about the uselessness of Whiskey Foxtrot's machine gun, until we unlock a scope. Suddenly we're scoring critical hit headshots and enjoying a hero we'd written off as a dud. A good example of *Battleborn* letting you adjust fighters on the fly.

"[We ask] 'What strange thing have we not put in the game yet?'" says Varnell when we enquire how such characters came to be. "We need a bird now? Okay, let's put in a bird! How about a penguin? Sometimes it's a character designer who's working on the gameplay saying, 'I'd really like a character who hooks someone in and sets them in a trap,' or 'I want a character who can fly' or 'I want the classic burst-rifle assault character'." It's this enthusiastic something-for-everyone mentality that Gearbox are clearly hoping will make *Battleborn* more accessible than most.

Just don't mistake accessibility for friendliness. The story campaign has



BELOW A ninja with dual katanas? Sold! A sentient mushroom? Er, don't call us, we'll call you.





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ABOVE *Battleborn* encourages tight team play - you don't stand a chance against sentries alone.

LEFT While slow and easy to kill, the minions are still not 1/100th as irritating as their big screen namesakes. Brrrr.





ABOVE E1 Dragon can squish foes with a clap of his giant hands or squash them with belly flops.

LEFT Layering 2D animated effects over 3D visuals gives *Battleborn* a look unlike any other game. Mmmm.

Battleborn

“Boldur and Miko are vital picks for teams adjusting to the steep difficulty curve”

RETURN TO THE BOTTOM

MOBAs live and die on their replayability and *Battleborn* is taking a risk by ditching Borderlands' permanent leveling. Everyone starting at zero each new level may incentivize choosing different characters and skill trees each playthrough, but not getting too attached to a lone hero might also make it harder to get invested in long-term play.

→ seen a major spike in difficulty since we last saw it. Enemy health is higher, their attacks hit harder and team respawns are worryingly low. The only way to avoid throwing lives away is by reviving downed teammates before the timer runs dry (or they foolishly hit revive anyway). It's the game's harsh way of pushing you toward working as a team, though not as cheap as when it throws waves of enemies at you that no lone gunman has a hope of surviving. Shield-wielding Boldur and Miko the healer aren't just for fans of dwarves and, er, sentient mushrooms. They're essential picks for teams adjusting to this steep difficulty curve. No one is going to accuse Gearbox of betraying Borderlands fans by catering to more casual gamers.

Mission improbable

The level structure will feel familiar to anyone who blasted through the Borderlands, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Slaughtering monsters, collecting shards (in-game currency) and yelling at anyone who wastes precious lives is the best kind of familiar, particularly when everyone's working together to take threats down. The slightly formulaic structure is better disguised than in Borderlands thanks to more varied goals. Escort missions give you access to killer

BELOW Ghalt's revolver/shotgun hybrid isn't the wackiest weapon, but it certainly leaves a dent.



mechs, and there's also some tower defense turret placement to help your team protect areas from waves of enemies. They're similar to the tower-defense elements we saw in *Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare 2*, though they feel a lot more crucial here.

New PvP mode, Inversion ("probably the most MOBA-like mode we have," says Varnell) has two teams of five trying to destroy each others' sentries – killer spider-bots that deal vicious amounts of damage and hide behind invulnerable shields. The only things capable of taking down those shields are the easily-destroyed minions you have to guard and guide across the battlefield. Whichever team destroys the most sentries, wins.

If story mode can get confusing then this PvP mode is like playing a first-person shooter through a kaleidoscope. At its worst, there's simply too much going on. Magic, gunfire and melee attacks from all sides make it hard to pick out which problem you should be prioritizing at any given time. Team communication is vital for any kind of forward push; arguably as important as in *Rainbow Six Siege*. Find yourself burdened with a bunch of mutes and you might as well start digging five graves.

But minutes later we yank one opponent – who, by our count, has slaughtered us three times now – into a crippling trap, then watch our whole team get beautiful, cathartic revenge. Or we get carried away beating mad scientists and killer robots to death with El Dragon's furious flailing fists, and our early doubts are pummeled to dust along with them. During these moments, *Battleborn's* hectic buzz suddenly makes perfect sense.

While feedback is disappointingly neutered to nerdy numbers floating out of heads (there's just something inherently wrong with burying a fist in someone's face, only to be rewarded with an apologetic number seven), Gearbox still know how to make a kill feel rewarding, with defeated warriors falling back as a red laser stakes through them to mark your victory. Then you tap the D-pad for a cocky taunt and take about 50 bizarre counterattacks from the surviving team-mates as punishment. Instant karma via mechanical owl to the face. Multiplayer in 2016 is stranger than we could ever have imagined. **OXM**

Kingdom Come: Deliverance

Kingdom Come: Deliverance

Live by the sword, die by the sword (occasionally go to the shops with a sword)

Tom Stone

PUBLISHER WARHORSE STUDIOS DEVELOPER WARHORSE STUDIOS
FORMAT XBOX ONE DUE 2016



LOST THE PLOT?

At one point Henry crosses a gang who offer crucial information if he first helps them to slaughter someone else. It's the easiest way to complete the quest and, not coincidentally, the least moral. But keep behaving like a cad and you'll develop a reputation. Villagers might refuse to trade with you, which sounds irritating, or they might flee in terror when they see you, which sounds more fun.

'Historically accurate' isn't a term that usually gets our pulses racing. But *Kingdom Come: Deliverance's* 15th century setting is anything but dull, it's opening cutscene boasting kidnapping, violence and the mad lust for royal power. There's nothing wrong with historical accuracy when it's built on Europe's dark past, and 1402's Kingdom of Bohemia is the perfect setting for an RPG packing some interesting ideas.

Our hero is a blacksmith's son, Henry, who begins *Deliverance* by losing his family and home to a civil war. It's set up for a classic rags to slightly-nicer-rags story, as Henry's strictly an outsider to the historical events unfolding around him. A lowly blacksmith's son isn't going to rise through the ranks, and though you may eventually risk your life to save a kidnapped king, you'll never occupy his throne. It's a refreshing approach, hopefully sidestepping the dumb historical meddling of recent *Assassin's Creeds*.

Fancy titles may elude Henry, but that doesn't prevent him being the smartest peasant in Europe. Quests are tackled through *Witcher 3*-style investigations and grilling villagers for any information. Hunting a bandit called Reeky, Henry presses locals for

clues, offers bribes when necessary and even indulges in a nasty bit of intimidation, so long as his speech level/reputation is beefy enough. Just don't try it on people bigger and stronger than Henry, unless you want to *be* history rather than explore it.

Gathering information helps with quests and lets you catch people in a lie. When a woman claimed she hadn't met Reeky, we knew she was fibbing thanks to the statements of other serfs in the area. It's a satisfying payoff to your sleuthing. But just be careful how you converse. Failing conversations potentially cuts off that exchange forever, though every quest will have multiple solutions.

Go searching for Reeky on little or misguided information and you'll lose hours aimlessly wandering 16km of accurately recreated locations based on the Czech Kingdom, including vast, explorable castles. Dense forests are so photorealistic we predict 90% of our time being spent lost in the trees. At least you won't lack for company, courtesy of random encounters with bandits and wild animals.

Heads won't roll

We're sold on exploration and investigating, then, but first-person combat is a little shakier. You can switch between five angles of attack anytime, while your opponent ducks and shifts their shield, forcing you to constantly change your approach. It's great in theory, but the blows lack impact. Blood loss and occasional swearing from the enemy are your only indicators of how effective your attacks are; both hard to gauge in the thick of combat. Hopefully, powering up Henry a few levels will improve it.

But then, we're not supposed to be an extraordinary knight. We're a lowly orphan on the tipping point of events far bigger than ourselves. Grilling village bumpkins is one thing, but we're looking forward to seeing how dialog trees work when we're rubbing shoulders with sneering royalty. Interestingly, once you do start the quests with big events such as raids and battles, they'll happen regardless of whether you show up or not. Time marches on, and what part you play in shaping the course of history will be yours to decide. **OXM**



"We knew she was lying thanks to the statements of other serfs in the area"



ABOVE It's too easy to 'accidentally' strike your own side during combat, changing allegiances in a second.

FAR LEFT Those better be separate screens, or we're riding our horse into a world of pain.



LEFT Villagers gather to watch someone burn at the stake. Very much the 15th century's answer to *America's Got Talent*. Toasty!

Pit People

Pit People

The Behemoth's Xbox One debut pits raucous jokes against Final Fantasy Tactics

Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

PUBLISHER THE BEHEMOTH DEVELOPER THE BEHEMOTH
FORMAT XBOX ONE DUE "BEFORE THE APOCALYPSE"?

Pit People is a turn-based tactics game in the same way that Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang is a car, Hulk Hogan a sportsman and Godzilla a Mark 7 on the Richter Scale. The label tells you something about the entity itself – that you move a set of characters around grids, bopping enemy skulls or splatting them with various projectiles, and that characters can be levelled up for higher attack stats and so forth. But it also suggests something fairly laid back and genteel, a management exercise with quaint costumes, and there's absolutely nothing laid back or genteel about *Pit People*. Consider Exhibit A: the walking cupcakes who heal people by spitting sugar frosting at them.

Pit People is a post-apocalyptic tale, too, but we're a long way from *Mad Max*. As the game begins, an enormous cartoon bear smashes into a planet, showering its surface with poisonous blood and fumes. This is bad news for the game's protagonist, Horatio the Berry Farmer, who already has Will Stamper's tyrannical narrator to worry about. Stamper was a highlight of The Behemoth's previous *Battleblock Theater* and he's up to his usual tricks here – an unhinged presence at your side who's forever insulting the cast, contradicting them

"You'll need a full hand of healers, artillery characters, unicorns and tuba ducks"

in cutscenes or just flat-out ordering everybody to die. The voiceover isn't the only part of *Pit People* that has a few screws loose – one Uzi-wielding miniboss arrives on a flying giraffe, while another group of foes escape the battle in a space shuttle helpfully provided by the cosmic bear.

Cheeky hollow

While intensely irreverent, the game is a familiar beast beneath the surface. Horatio is your basic tank with a sword and a sturdy lump of picket fence, able to weather arrow bombardments providing he's facing the right way, but weak against armored enemies. He's joined early on in the game by Princess Pipastrella, a squeaky adventuress equipped with an enormous mace, perfect for smashing through defenses. There's also Cyclops, who can throw axes at people to stun them, and Sofia, a Viking with a net you can use to capture enemies and turn them to your cause. Nabbing and converting opponents is *Pit People's* long game. You'll need a full hand of healers, artillery characters and, as the case may be, unicorns and ducks with tubas, to survive both the campaign and clashes with other army generals (there's head-to-head support for up to 2v2). You can field up to six at once, or 12 if you play co-op, out of a total army of 100 characters.

As with *Battleblock Theater*, *Pit People's* appeal is going to rest primarily on your tolerance or not for The Behemoth's particular vein of goofball humor, to say nothing of Stamper's madcap performance. Genre aficionados accustomed to magic broadswords and ancient prophecies may find the game's hostility to convention irritating. We're also not sure, just yet, that The Behemoth are as marvellous at developing strategy games as they are at creating action-platformers – what we've sampled of the game so far leaves us enthused but not bowled over. Still, it's a pleasure to see something this bonkers on a console that is too often pigeon-holed as a shooters-and-sports machine. And as the narrator of *Battleblock Theater* would say, "If you hate our stuff, shut up and do better!" **OXM**

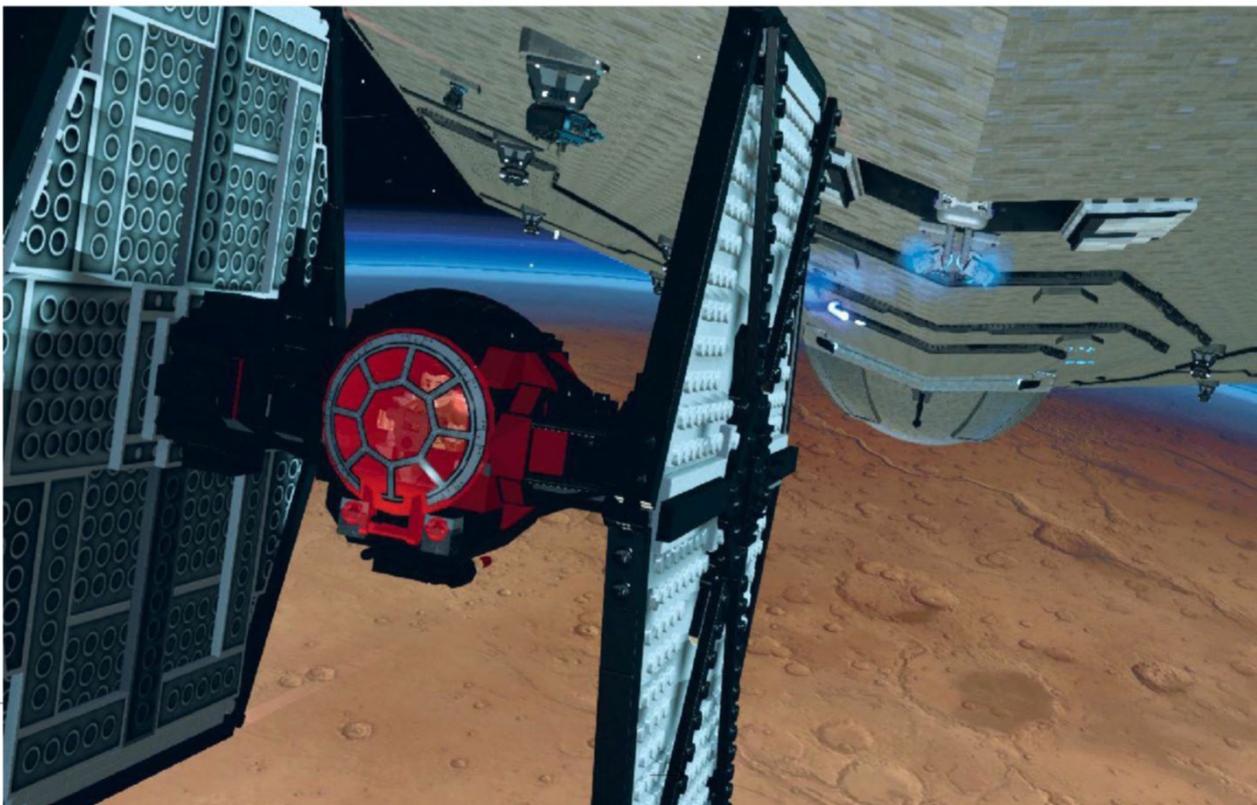


UPSTAGER

Battleblock Theater is now available on Xbox One via backwards compatibility, and if you haven't played it yet you're a mad idiot. The platforming is tight and varied, with different flavours of block feeding into sophisticated puzzles, and co-op sessions can be utterly vicious. Need to cross a water trap? Chuck your partner in there to serve as a stepping stone.



RIGHT Vehicle sections have been spruced up too, with more open areas that allow for a far greater degree of control over ships. There's even a cockpit view featuring a blocky little dashboard.



Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens

Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens

The Force had a bit of a lie-in actually, but it'll be up soon

James Nouch

PUBLISHER WARNER BROS DEVELOPER TT FUSION
FORMAT XBOX 360, XBOX ONE DUE 28 JUNE



LEFT Buying the models in real-life would cost a packet. Added bonus of virtual model: mom can't Hoover up parts.



Break it right down (it is designed for that, after all) and Lego is about the pleasure of mashing simple blocks into novel configurations. And now that the Lego series has been chugging along for more than ten years, that's also the unenviable task that falls to its developer. After all, how do you serve up something surprising out of such well-worn ingredients?

TT Fusion (the wing of TT that made Wii U's superb *Lego City Undercover*) respond to the challenge with a run of mechanical novelty, presenting an array of new features alongside the expected flood of characters and collectibles. So you will, of course, be able to swing lightsabers and fire blasters with gleeful abandon, watching as your wicked First Order adversaries collapse into bundles of bricks and seductive studs.

But you'll also be able to engage in cinematic minifigure shootouts, thanks to the addition of 'blaster battles'. These are perhaps the most surprising addition to *The Force Awakens*, and they act as set-piece moments that transform the game into a bloodless *Gears of War*, complete with waist-high walls and roadie runs. In one example, we watch as Han Solo, Chewie and Finn wander through a shiny Starkiller Base, only to find themselves pinned down by a withering barrage of First Order fire.

The camera shifts low and pulls in close as Han hunkers down in cover, popping out to return fire. The smuggler's lethal precision is rewarded with comedy pratfalls rather

than explosions of gore, however, with one well-placed headshot sending a Stormtrooper's helmet spinning.

Blaster battles aren't simply shooting galleries, however, and there will still be opportunities to build interactive bits and pieces, either to provide an offensive advantage, solve a puzzle or simply serve up a gag. Enemies, meanwhile, will also be able to whip up their own blocky constructions, marking the very first time that the series has featured AI building. You'll have to target these villainous builders especially early, or else you risk ending up on the receiving end of jury-rigged artillery.

Build me up

Multi-builds are the other headline feature of *The Force Awakens*, and their introduction represents the first significant overhaul to the building system of a Lego game in a decade. Now, instead of simply approaching the bustling bundles of bricks and holding the B button, you're presented

"You can always bash your new structure down into parts, to help build and rebuild"

with a choice of builds, each rendered onscreen in a sparkly glowing outline.

Just push the analogue stick in the direction of your preferred build, and your plastic protagonist will quickly cobble those blocks into shape. Then, should you change your mind, you can easily bash your knobby structure back down into its constituent parts, allowing you to build and rebuild to your heart's content.

"It really lends itself to Lego's ethos of building and creating and the whole tactility of Lego, which is something we're very excited about," enthuses associate producer Tim Wileman, but there's more to multi-builds than just the promise of creative empowerment. The system also allows for proper puzzle-solving, expanding the scope

Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens

→ of your interactions to create multi-stage conundrums which force you to think your way through the various possibilities for any bundle of blocks.

At its most basic level, then, a multi-build might open the way to two separate paths: one that continues your progression through the level and one that leads to a delectable collectible. But a more complex example might require you to build and rebuild in a particular sequence. In one instance, we watch Han throw together a turret which he uses to blast a nearby tree to bits. This nonchalant bit of ecoterrorism allows R2-D2 to enter the area, so when Han then knocks down his turret to whip up an elevator, our astromech pal is on hand to give it a jolt of power.

Poe-try in motion

It hardly turns the game into a *Portal*-esque brain bender, but a smattering of mechanical innovation is welcome. Of more interest to film fans is how *The Force Awakens* is set to surprise in narrative terms. TT Fusion have been granted the go-ahead to fill in some unexplored blanks in the Star Wars canon. These 'bridge levels' - so-called because they bridge the storytelling space between *Episodes VI* and *VII* - portray the interstitial exploits of characters such as Han, Chewbacca, Kylo Ren and Captain Phasma, sometimes touching on established character backstory but often breaking new narrative ground. Want to know why C-3PO went all Big Boss and was rocking a natty red arm in *Episode VII*? You'll find out soon.

These stories will be delivered with the blend of reverence and slapstick that's become a hallmark of the series - the product of a studio that loves poking fun, yes, but one that also has huge affection for its source material. As Finn braves the icy exterior of *VII*'s Starkiller Base, for instance, we spy a gaggle of frolicking First Order thugs assembling a Darth Vader snowman. And even as we smirk at the frosty fascists and their extracurricular antics, we can't help but notice the care that's gone into Finn's animation - he handles noticeably differently from Han, Chewie, Rey or Poe.

Because it's in the details that the Lego series has always had the power to charm and impress, and it's clear from our time at TT Fusion that the

"TT Fusion has the go-ahead to fill in some blanks in the Star Wars canon"

developers are sweating the small stuff just as much as those back-of-the-box features. The studio's team of animators are currently working to ensure that its central cast of characters all have that distinctive feel, in spite of minifigure uniformity.

"If you strip a minifigure down to its basics, take its hair off, they're all the same," explains TT Fusion's head of animation Matt Palmer. As such, Palmer and co have been studying every frame of the movie, analyzing the way each character walks, runs, and fights in their pursuit of an exaggerated authenticity. "It's a fantastic challenge. When you nail it, and you get it right, it feels incredible. You see children playing it, you see people demoing these games all over the place, and it's an enormous sense of pride in hearing a child that you've never met go 'ahhh, dad look at this! it's really cool!'"

So it all comes down, once again, to the question of how you turn a familiar set of building blocks into something exciting, surprising, and delightful. If our visit to TT Fusion is anything to go by, it seems that the studio's solution is a combination of diligent care, wilful wackiness and considered innovation. Come 28 June, we'll find out for ourselves how well that recipe works. **OXM**

CHARACTER BUILDING

True to series form, *The Force Awakens* will launch with a colossal roster of unlockable and customisable characters. Somewhere in the region of 200 are planned - all the obvious faces as well as enough obscure fan favorites to fill Mos Eisley cantina. A fleet of 40 vehicles will also be available, all of them lovingly recreated from existing Lego kits.



BELOW TT Fusion have achieved the impossible and made BB-8 even more hectic than in the film.





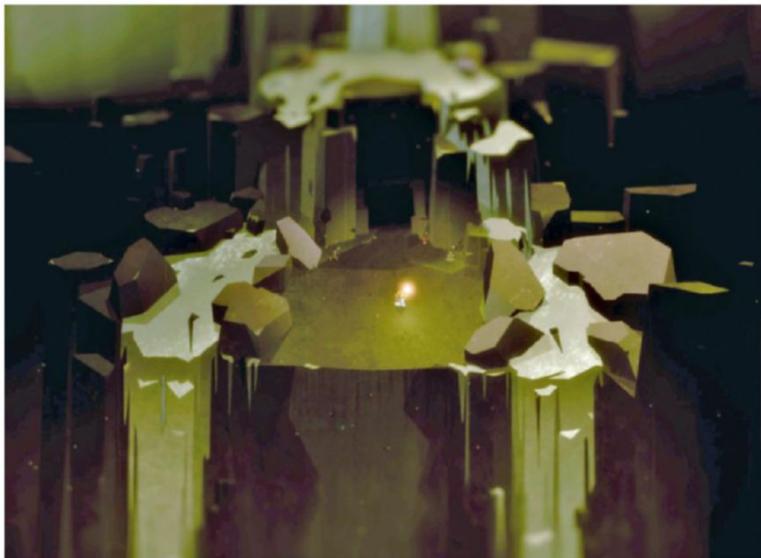
ABOVE Finn braves Starkiller Base's deadly drops. Han is too cool for even mild peril.

RIGHT The chunky lightsabers and day-glo blaster fire fit Lego's look well.





036



ABOVE The ultra-zoomed-out camera makes your character feel utterly dwarfed by the environment.

LEFT Once generated, layouts keep their shape, so you'll be able to retrace your steps should you need to.

RIGHT It's unwise to stray too far from a campfire, even when you're well-provisioned.

Below

Below

What lies beneath? Expect a whole lot of death and despair before you find out

Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS DEVELOPER CAPYBARA
FORMAT XBOX ONE DUE SUMMER 2016

Videogames are pretty nihilistic, as a rule – let's face it, most of them boil down to murdering people for points – but there's nothing like having to loot your own corpse to really hammer home a developer's commitment to being thoroughly grim. And *Below* doesn't draw the line at self-pillaging.

Like obvious influence *Dark Souls*, it's a game of shadowy corners, lost character progression upon death (you're reborn at a campfire, and must reclaim all your gear from your now-rotting previous self) and taut melee scraps, in which entering an unknown area at a run is tantamount to trying to football-tackle a cactus.

But where *Dark Souls* at least spared you from having to worry about the bare necessities, *Below* also has hunger and thirst gauges that empty in minutes, obliging you to forage continually as you explore. Once you've found food, you may need to cook it. In order to cook it, you'll need a campfire. And in order to reach a campfire, you'll almost certainly need to put a number of angry magic polyhedrons to the sword.

Given a sturdy shield, the game's earlier foes aren't too bothersome, but beware: take so much as a scrape and you'll start to bleed, obliging you to craft bandages from bits of moss or

cauterise your injuries with a red-hot blade. Makes *The Revenant* look soft.

What does *Below* offer in return for such unremitting bleakness? Well, as with *Dark Souls*, the thrill of achievement is proportionally greater for the extra blood and sweat, and the combat seems excellent: a real question of range, timing, exploiting the terrain, and bringing the right weapon for the situation (you can only carry a couple at once). Spears offer power and reach at the expense of a narrow hit window and slow attacks. Bows are a surprisingly handy tool in melee – you can swap quickly to your sword and shield after peppering an unaware foe – but take care you aren't run down. After the clone warfare circus that was *Super Time Force*, it's fascinating to see Capybara try their hand at something this dicey and deliberate.

Lighten up

And then there's the world itself, a procedurally generated abyss stretching beneath the surface of a lonely island, composed of organically winding caverns and the glistening diamond designs of a forgotten civilization. The game's single-screen environments may seem a little murky in screenshots, but they're actually full of beautifully captured moving parts – waving grass, dark shadows and trickling pools, together with more pressing details such as tripwires and pressure pads.

Clues about the universe are everywhere: hold your lantern out over a chasm, and you might catch the glimmer of a sunken edifice. Certain objects hum gently, for reasons that will doubtless become clear as the game goes on. Or not. This is very much the show-don't-tell type of narrative, with text confined to the inventory screen. We suspect it'll take more than one playthrough to get to the bottom of things, assuming *Below*'s labyrinth has a bottom.

Capybara's work has always delighted us – few independents manage to be so inventive yet also consistent – and *Below* feels like it could be their masterwork. Precisely crafted and savage, it's a love letter to the adventurer in all of us, albeit a letter written in blood... **OXM**

FLAME BAIT

Progression in *Below* hinges around a magic lantern, which is used to light the pyres that serve as checkpoints, and can also be clipped to your belt during a fight, unlike a burning torch. You'll be able to enhance it with special glyphs later for unspecified benefits. Watch out, though – the more you can see, the more things can see you...



“The thrill of achievement is proportionally greater for the extra blood and sweat”

BRING OUT THE BIG GUNS



THE DADDY OF FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

DOOM IS HERE TO RIP YOUR HEAD OFF **DAVID HOUGHTON**

The Marine is nameless so you can imagine yourself as him



An estimated 20 million people played *Doom* (1993) in its first two years. Imagine the death toll

D



oom, more than any other sequel or reboot in recent memory, is defiantly, well, *Doom*-like. That might sound like a strange statement to make, but such confident force of identity is surprisingly rare in today's games. As budgets spiral, and risks get higher, and entire trends are born and die during the length of the development cycle, even the most established of franchises find themselves partaking in a bit of portmanteau design. Call of Duty now contains as much *Titanfall* and *Mirror's Edge* as *Modern Warfare*. Every Ubisoft game is Assassin's Creed to some degree, and even Master Chief has learned to double-jump and ground-pound.

So you might have expected this new *Doom*, coming 12 years after the series' last entry – and with a canceled, military FPS-style reboot

RIGHT Behold, the new Hell Knight. Similar to *Doom 3*'s, but thankfully less ass-faced. More like a buff xenomorph now.

BELOW The new *Revenant* might look scrawny, but muscle doesn't matter when you have rocket launchers on your back.

in the interim – to feel like a modern fashionista dressed in ironic retro garb. Like Kate Moss wearing a \$1,000 coat made of poorly rendered guts. But the reality could not be further removed. This is a *Doom* that knows what its name means. This is a *Doom* that knows how important, clever and fun *Doom* can be. It knows that it doesn't need to be anything else, and it certainly doesn't want to be. And so, just like the 1993 original, it is a game simply called *Doom* that plays like *Doom*, because it knows that that is enough. In fact, in 2016, it's about the most exhilarating idea around.

Doom with a view

Not that there's anything simple or basic going on here. While *Doom* [2016] impales its colors – mostly red – to the original game's bloody mast with pride, its reinvention of those values is as intelligent and layered as any major action game design you'd care to mention. And more so than most. There's a vast amount of depth supporting all of those whirling chainsaws, volleys of plasma and torrents of endless, exploding viscera. You might not notice it as you hurtle around scenery, leap over cover and rain down rockets upon the baying hordes of Hell. But it's there, every step of the way, ensuring that *Doom* demands as much strategic, on-the-fly thinking as a well-balanced RTS or fighting game, at the same time that its hectic buzz of action supercharges your adrenal gland to the level of a minor medical emergency.

As executive producer Marty Stratton confirms when we discuss the ferocious intelligence at the heart of *Doom*'s incendiary combat





**IT SUPERCHARGES
YOUR ADRENAL
GLAND TO THE
LEVEL OF A
MINOR MEDICAL
EMERGENCY**





**“DOOM IS AS
MUCH ABOUT
HOW YOU
KILL AS WHAT
YOU KILL”**

Doom's original name was the somewhat less iconic 'Attack of the Attackers'

→ system, every element of the game is carefully tuned in terms of its effect on the wider ecosystem. Nothing is designed in isolation. Because *Doom* is as much about how you kill as what you kill. Every weapon is a part of a puzzle and each enemy class a chess piece.

"When you come into a space and you see these pieces, it starts a cycle of thought for you, like, 'I've got to take this person out, or this enemy. Because they do X, and I'm carrying this weapon, so I'm going to do this, and then I'm going to swap weapons to handle these closer-range guys...'

"Really a fundamental part of the fun of the game is that mental chess match you play with the AI. That kind of symbiotic relationship between the guns and the demons has been very organic as we've developed the AI, and as we've developed the systems behind the game."

We're all Doomed

It shows. Everything in *Doom* has purpose. Nothing exists just for the gleeful spectacle of spontaneous bodily carnage. Okay, not *just* for that. Take the weapon set. While *Doom*'s array of legendary remote dismemberment options is vast, and each tool ever-present once you've collected it, every gun, no matter how extravagant, is the key to a particular lock. (If keys had the power to spill the lock's guts out.)

The rocket launcher, for instance, does what you'd expect, unleashing swift ordnance and considerable splash damage. It isn't necessarily the instant killer you might expect, however, making it great for long-range crowd control and as a mid-range duelling weapon against Hell's bigger, tougher warriors.

The plasma rifle's rapid-fire showers of fizzing hot death are a fantastic medium-range spam solution, but the gun's secondary fire mode unleashes a weighty, area-of-effect blob which slowly murders any Hellspawn that lingers within it. Wade in there immediately afterward with the super shotgun, and *Doom*'s double-barreled reaper will win the day swiftly and decisively – as long as you can deftly manage the pace and flow of your actions as you chain together shots, reloads and evasions.

Doom is always moving, *Doom* is always thinking, and *Doom* is always



ABOVE Stratton also executive produced *Quake Live*. If you're good enough, you can find his name hidden at the end of its hardcore training level.

changing. If you're going to survive and conquer, you're going to have to do the same, acting in the moment but also always just a step ahead, as you shape, reshape and direct the flow of battle with every piece of demon-evaporating kit you have.

Stratton perfectly captures its vibe: "when you're playing the game, you almost feel like you're your own fight choreographer". *Doom*, you see, exists at the point where creativity and destruction coincide. And it's a uniquely thrilling place to inhabit. But for all of the speed, noise, fire and fury, *Doom* is not a game that strives to overwhelm you. Rather, its intent is to keep you running on that bloody knife-edge between death and glory.

"Playing *Doom* is a rollercoaster ride, and it really should be a rollercoaster ride," says Stratton. "What we're trying to create are these moments of extreme power, [but] then you take a couple of hits and you're like 'Oh my god, I'm going to die!' And then you bring yourself back – you pull out the chainsaw [handily mapped to down on the D-pad so you can whip it out at any time] or you pull out your BFG, and you bring yourself back from the brink of death, and then have this overwhelming sense of accomplishment.

"Or you're halfway through a hard fight, and you think 'I'm not gonna make it' because two Barons of Hell just spawned. And then you look over and you see a Quad Damage power-up. Really, it's just about making sure that all of the pieces are working together and that we're giving players opportunities to think, because most of the time that's the challenge."

MAN IS THE REAL MONSTER

Let's not forget multiplayer. Let's really, really not. Because it's incredible. As fast, acrobatic and spectacularly bloody as the campaign, *Doom*'s team deathmatch has a slightly different spin. With health packs still your only means of staying alive, and high-powered ordnance flying all over the place, knowing the fastest route to recovery is key. If you're going to succeed, tempering your destructive output with a finely honed situational awareness of How Not To Die is the most important thing you will learn.

Fortunately, when it gets down to it, the killing is endlessly satisfying as well. Eschewing the full-sized arsenal of the campaign for two-gun loadouts – with equipment such as grenades and personal teleporters available too – multiplayer's offensive strategy is all about creative combinations of weaponry and special, secondary fire options. "I'll run with the static cannon," explains Marty as we discuss favorite tactics, referring to a rifle that powers up as you move. "You run on, charge it up, get a shot, and if you hit it's a pretty good bit of damage. And then you probably close some distance, and then you switch to the super shotgun as the finishing element. It's really good."



**BACK FROM THE BRINK OF
DEATH... YOU HAVE THIS
OVERWHELMING SENSE
OF ACCOMPLISHMENT**



Want to party like it's 1993? *Doom* is playable on Xbox One as a backwards compatible XBLA game

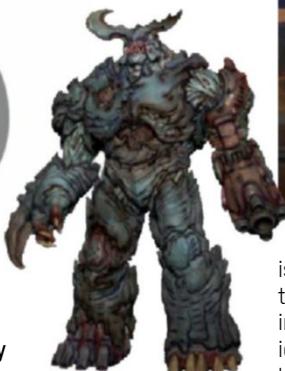
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beyond the core back-and-forth, in-and-out of direct confrontation, *Doom's* tactical smarts manifest in the form of its Glory Kills. Hilariously savage melee takedowns, resulting in glorious eruptions of viscera and eyeballs yanked out of sockets, these grim finishers also deliver bigger than usual drops of ammo and health. With shooting a nigh-constant requirement during engagements, and no regenerative health to babysit you through the giddy nightmare, Glory Kills provide an enjoyably tactical approach to survival.

Used all the health packs in the area too soon? Schoolboy error. But look around. Who or what can you kill quickly enough to fix your mistake and pull yourself back into the fight? Which enemy can you soften up fast enough to score the finisher before you drop, and how do you isolate him safely from the pack in order to execute the kill? You have three seconds to solve the problem. Don't worry about showing your working – it's not like our special red marking pen shows up over the blood.

Once you're up to speed though – and oh, what dizzying speed it is – you'll find the power to shape your path across the redder-than-usual planet in less direct ways too. As *Doom* guides you through its full (very full) box of tricks – introducing things like the correct use of exploding barrels, and why you shouldn't grab its most potent power-ups before you're sure you know the full scale of your opposition, and how to use verticality via jump-pads and teleports to both attack and evade – it will also start to hand out the facility to customize your abilities, via points awarded for Glory Kills.

Don't expect Mass Effect here. As should be clear by this point, *Doom*



ABOVE RIGHT
Doom's levels are big. Forget tight corridors: this is like a showdown in a multi-tiered adventure playground.

BOTTOM LEFT
That right there is a Baron of Hell. They are rather tough.



is *Doom*, and the tweaks it makes to refresh itself using (selectively implemented) modern systems and ideas are all to help deliver a fresher, better version of its true essence. It's as much about making 2016 work for *Doom* as it is the inverse.

"I wouldn't say that we've taken a step at all towards massive, sweeping RPG-type systems," clarifies Stratton. "We've kept our upgrades and our progression around the types of things that really matter when you play *Doom*, which is your guns and making them better and more functional, and geared them more towards your personal preferences as to how you like to play. You upgrade these things in different areas, but they really all relate to the way you move and the way you shoot; the core fundamental principles of playing the game and having fun with the game."

Fruit of the Doom

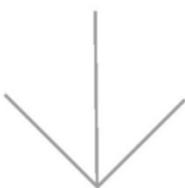
This stuff isn't here to quieten down any component of *Doom's* roaring combat engine, but rather to allow players to emphasize the elements they like best, once they find their own play style. You might,

for instance, want to activate a perk that imparts a speed boost after every Glory Kill, making melee a more fundamental part of your navigation. Or you may switch on bigger ammo drops, if you're the sort of player who likes to mark out their personal space with a perpetual cloud of bullets.

Best of all, these gameplay mods can be swapped in and out at any given time, in sympathy with *Doom's* ever-changing demands. Another reminder that *Doom* is as much about the strategy as it is the slaughter.

If all these considerations sound exhausting, don't worry. The gang at id remember that, despite the stereotype, the old-school FPS was as much about thoughtful exploration and intricate environmental details as it was clearing wave after wave of vicious Hellspawn. While it's highly unlikely we'll see the return of red and yellow keycard hunts, or sniffing around the edges of rooms for those invisible doors, *nu-Doom* is bringing that more sedate, cerebral element back too. And it looks like it's doing it with a fair amount of creativity.

Imbuing *Doom* with a narrative was always going to be a tricky process,



KILLER FUDGING AMMO

Guns. Lots of guns. That's what *Doom* is all about. You'll end up carrying a great many, and in any single, large-scale fight you might well end up needing to use most of them. That's a lot to handle at first, particularly in a game in which constant movement is king, stopping is death, and pretty much everything else is death too.

To take the edge off that challenge, and facilitate the full potential of *Doom's* whirling combat, id have replaced the modern Y-button weapon-cycle with a floating radial selector. Raising it won't pause the game, but it will briefly slow time, furnishing precious split-seconds to reappraise strategies and current options. It also adds a delicious, bullet-time garnish to that fight choreographer feeling Stratton is talking about. *Doom's* battles play out with a kind of musicality, a tactile sense of rhythm and flow, and the brief moments of slow-mo delivered by the weapon wheel are the gameplay equivalent of wind-ups and bass drops.



Doom has been mentioned in *E.R.*, *Stargate* and *Friends*. Who could forget The One with the Cyberdemon?

and an entirely unwelcome one were Doomguy ever to be forced to stop his rampage for a lengthy bout of emoting. Whatever opposition he may face from the denizens of Hell, it's easy to imagine that his greatest enemy might be the cutscene. Hard to Glory Kill a .mov file, too. And so id seems to have taken inspiration, at least in part, from that other purveyor of undead arcanery, *Dark Souls*. If you stray from the beaten track and solve an environmental conundrum or two, you'll find that *Doom* delivers backstory and information without ever pushing its tales in your face, as Stratton is keen to emphasize.

"We've tried to keep that out of the way of a player that just wants to have the music turned up through the game and blast through and kill demons," he says. "But if you do slow down and you take those moments between combat to really discover what's been going on, there's some really interesting stuff there."

Those storytelling techniques certainly look very *Doom* indeed at this stage. At one point in the campaign, Doomguy finds a locked door secured by a handprint scanner. He can't activate it, but he can trigger a hologram recording of recent events in the room, which plays out for all the world like a sci-fi version of one of *Dark Souls*' warning phantoms. A hapless marine appears in front of us, and is then immediately torn down and dragged away by a Hell Knight. If we follow the recording to discover the marine's place of rest (in pieces), we can remove his hand and use it to open the door. Don't ever think *Doom*'s downtime is going to be dull.



owever fast or slow you take it, *Doom*'s campaign will eventually finish. There is, however, a solution. In fact, much like in the case of Mars' reanimated zombie soldiers, the end is really only the beginning. *Doom* has a thing called SnapMap, and SnapMap might just be the most exciting thing to happen to the FPS this generation.

Essentially a very powerful suite of content creation tools, not dissimilar to Halo's Forge, SnapMap evolves that functionality to deliver the nearest console gaming has to the PC's modding scene. You'll have all the expected, modular elements of the game's design to play with – all the architecture, and the monsters, and the hardware. But you'll also be able to define behavior, game logic and event triggers. And as such, you'll be able to build almost anything. Scripted, linear campaign levels, full of secrets and surprises? Easy. New multiplayer maps and multiplayer modes? No problem at all. Custom cutscenes? When the machinima



RIGHT Just two enemies? This is quiet for *Doom*. Still, you might want something larger than that pistol...

BELOW Redesigns of *Doom*'s classic monsters look suitably awful. The iconic '90s vibe given solid modern detail.

community gets hold of this, you can expect YouTube to be flooded with hundreds of short films, each making up for the disappointment of the official *Doom* movie in their own way.

Old Doom, new tricks

Of course, as Forge's pancake-flipping multiplayer mode has shown us, the true power of any creation suite is proved by how possible it is to fly in the face of the original game's genre and intent. SnapMap has already thrown up non-violent memory tests and tower-defence modes. Stratton confirms that the system is going to be supported long-term, in-keeping with id's plans for the whole game as a platform. In fact he sounds genuinely excited about it.

"If you were just to do a single-player DLC or a single-player extra mission or something like that – or even a multiplayer mission – that's cool and everything, and we have plans along those lines as well," he says. "But to be able to create more tools and more content that somebody else is going to expand on, and do things that you didn't even think about when you were creating it, that's really where it gets cool. And it's where, as we feed the community, we're excited about the life of the things that we create being extended and manipulated by somebody else."

An infinite *Doom* generator, then? Like its own Hellish invasion, the game is busting rudely back through into the modern world, taking over hearts and minds, and then becoming a spawn-point for potentially endless waves of its hectic, ingenious, intoxicating bloodbath. Like everything on show, that's utterly, typically *Doom*. And after 23 years, we really wouldn't have it any other way. **OXM**

THE LONG, HARD ROAD OUT OF HELL

If all of this sounds like too much to take on at once, don't worry. While *Doom* isn't for a second going to let up on being *Doom*, it is aware of the rip-roaring culture shock it's bringing, and it knows how to teach as well as punish. Its opening sections are carefully designed to introduce its complexity through deliberately paced, worked examples – think of the way *Resident Evil 4*'s opening village siege taught you all the fundamentals while you were too excited to notice the lesson.





**DOOM IS
BUSTING
RUDELY BACK
THROUGH INTO
THE MODERN
WORLD, TAKING
OVER HEARTS
AND MINDS**





OXM INVESTIGATES

Where

Microsoft's grand designs for Xbox One

next for

could turn everything we know about

Xbox

videogame consoles upside down EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL

One?

We can remember when all of this was Dashboard blades. Time flies



RIGHT *Quantum Break* looks fabulous, but 2016's Xbox exclusives promise to exceed it.

T

he Xbox One was designed to evolve, and over the past three years it has done precisely that. Microsoft have tweaked the console's uniquely flexible operating system from month to month, fielding fan suggestions via the Xbox Feedback website. They have added new services such as backwards compatibility with Xbox 360 titles and the Xbox Game Preview program. Last winter, they reorganized the Xbox One's entire Dashboard to coincide with the release of Windows 10, laying the foundations for cross-platform multiplayer in games like *#IDARB* and the late *Fable Legends*. It's been something of a rollercoaster, and the ride isn't over yet. In fact, Microsoft's current plans for the Xbox One may redefine the very notion of a videogame console, period.

Before we sink our teeth into the meat of that claim, a little refresher on the state of the console business. Loosely speaking, the appeal of consoles is that they're stable – there's no need to keep upgrading them in order to play the latest games, as with a PC. But this comes at a price. Firstly, every

console generation has to end eventually and the result, even allowing for backwards compatibility schemes, is that a massive library of titles vanishes under the rug.

"We get the box out, we put the old console in there, a bunch of old controllers and games, and we stick it all in the closet, hoping that some day nostalgia will get us playing those games again," says head of Xbox Phil Spencer. "And then you buy the new console and a whole new library of games."

The other drawback of a fixed platform is that it can only evolve so far. As the difference in visual quality between, say, *Gears of War 1* and *Gears 3* demonstrates, canny creators are capable of working the miraculous on hardware they've toiled with for years, but there's only so much you can achieve with the same old bits of metal.

→ **Windows of opportunity**

Microsoft want to break Xbox fans out of that cycle of redundancy. Their solution? The Universal Windows Platform (UWP), a set of development tools that are designed to function across all Microsoft hardware by default, from PCs through mobile phones to the Xbox One – and, crucially, whatever the Xbox One turns into. In the short term, the UWP

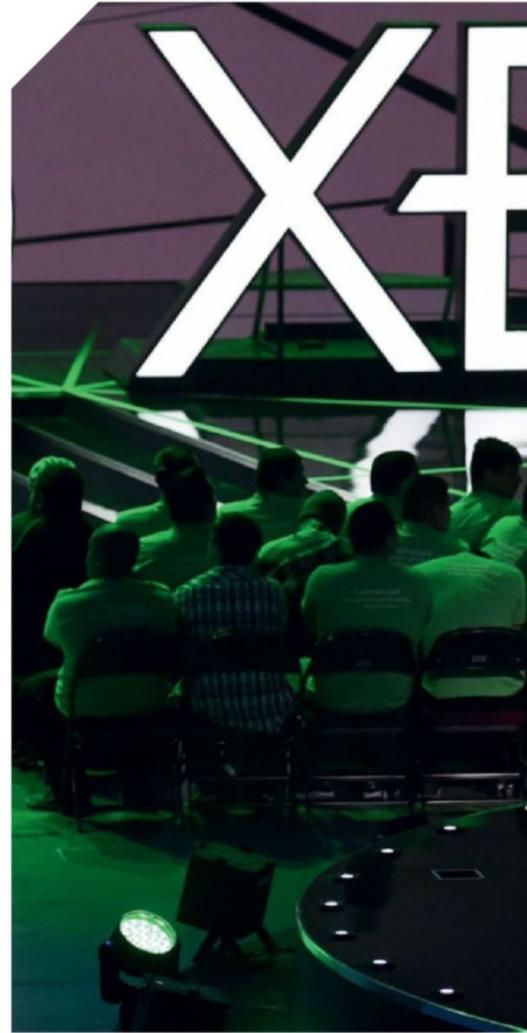
 **Achievement unlocked**
1 Sibling rivalry
 Xbox One continues to outsell the Xbox 360 at the same point in its life.



1 million of the billion hours clocked up in January were by us. Not that we're addicted. Nope



RIGHT Future Gears of War games might allow online play with PC rivals thanks to UWP magic.



→ allows developers to make games for PC and console simultaneously, increasing the flow of titles to each. But the more exciting consequence is that thanks to the all-encompassing flexibility of the UWP, the Xbox One itself can actually be upgraded – endowed with more advanced components, that is, rather than just given a mere facelift – without forcing fans to buy a new version of the console to play the latest games.

As Spencer explains to *OXM*, Universal Windows applications will be “backward and forward compatible” – they’ll scale to whatever Microsoft hardware you play on, taking advantage of beefier technology if available, while performing happily on older machines. He’s unable to say how and when exactly Microsoft might upgrade the Xbox One (don’t expect to open up the hood for manual upgrades) and, given the cost of launches, you shouldn’t anticipate a new slab every year. But the possibilities are pretty mind-boggling: the predictability and security of a traditional console platform, with every Xbox owner able to play every game from every developer, but with more potent versions of the hardware on offer to people who want games to look and feel their absolute best.

So why is now the right time to try this? In a nutshell, because of the mobile market and the mania for new hardware it has given rise to. “People want better hardware, better games overnight,” says Mike Ybarra, head of program management for Xbox. “Mobile has changed consumer behavior patterns incredibly. Phones are five, six, seven hundred-dollar devices – people buy them almost every two years. Some buy them every year.” This hunger for gadgets goes hand in hand, however, with the expectation that all the old software will continue to run on the new device. It creates an environment in which the evolution of software must be “decoupled” from a particular piece of tech,



Achievement unlocked
2 Net worth
 Xbox Live players clocked up over a billion hours in January 2016.





“You don’t want consoles to ever act like a Windows PC in terms of gaming, having to update drivers all the time”

to use Spencer’s phrase, in order to run well across a vast arsenal of devices.

Microsoft feel Xbox fans have come to think of consoles in the same way – they want more powerful hardware, more often, but they also want the same software to be playable on everything. “On the software side we’ve seen [the impact of that],” Ybarra says. “We’re now seeing it on the hardware side, too, where consumers say ‘I want the latest, give me the latest, and everything better work on my old stuff too’. And so the demands are very different, largely driven by the mobile model. If you buy an iPhone 6, the consumer’s expectation is that every single app on that iPhone just works on your old SIM, and all the new ones will too.” Conversely, you might decide against buying

the new phone because your old one runs the same apps well enough. “That mindset is going into the gaming world. The mentality of gamers now is it’s going to work, it better just work. So as Phil alluded to, we’re developing a strategy to ensure we can meet demand.”

→ The hard cell

Like Spencer, Ybarra shies away from any specifics about possible hardware upgrades for Xbox One, but he does make an important distinction – whatever form it takes, the console will always feel like a console in terms of ease of use. This isn’t a sneaky attempt to replace the box in your living room with an old-school PC. “You do not want the console to ever act like a Windows PC does today in terms of gaming. I just mean the



MICROSOFT’S DESTINY?

Little is known about Rare’s *Sea of Thieves*, but its opulent “shared world” and teamwork emphasis remind us strongly of *Destiny*. Phil Spencer agrees that Bungie’s looter-shooter is an influence. “I love the way *Destiny* is a 20-minute, two-hour or eight-hour experience, and I can decide how much – maybe we’ll do a Strike, or maybe it’s an all-nighter and we’re running Crota. I love that programming, and I thought they did a really nice job [of releasing content through] the week – Nightfall was on Tuesday, you had to finish it to get the XP bump, and you need your points because Xur is on Friday.

“There are definitely things we can learn from. I love the programming, the pick-your-own duration, and I think the fabric of *Sea of Thieves* offers a lot of opportunities there. That’s a nice place for games, giving people different sizes of experience depending on the time they have. *Sea of Thieves* – I’m very excited about it. From the first frame to me it felt like a Rare game, and with Gregg Mayles [on board] and Craig Duncan running the studio, hopefully it’s the culmination of what Rare have learned in their history, bringing it into, as you said, what we see with big service games today.”

ORIGINAL PIRATE MATERIAL



360-DEGREE SPIN

The announcement of Xbox One backwards compatibility with Xbox 360 games was perhaps our highlight of E3 2015 – OXM had been told by insiders back in 2014 that it simply wasn't doable. Will Microsoft keep going with the scheme until every last-gen game runs on Xbox One? "I think we'll continue to look at the feedback site for the titles that people want," says Mike Ybarra. "We'll continue to work with publishers, and as long as that's active we'll go and chase those titles. Our model has shifted a little bit – we release titles when they're ready instead of on a monthly basis, because our customers have told us 'don't wait a month, just get the titles to us'. So if a title's ready I tell the engineering team, 'go, you don't have to ask me or anybody – let's get these out!'"

He adds: "A thing that's great about our industry – our consumers are rabid fans and they make themselves heard. So there's a list of things about Xbox One that people want, and there are areas I would love to fix. I don't think there'll ever be a day when I can sit down and say 'cheers, we did it', because this business moves so fast."

BRING OUT YOUR DEAD



Achievement unlocked

3 Chief grows up

Halo 5: Guardians is the first numbered Halo to be rated T for Teen in the US.

→ complexity – having to update your drivers all the time, rebooting because of who knows what." Ybarra points to Microsoft's Surface Book as an indication of the direction new Xbox One models might take – some versions feature a more advanced NVIDIA graphics card, but Microsoft decide when and how to update that card, which means they can minimize the risk of technical hiccups. "Our goal is to make PC gaming as easy as the console," he adds. "And I think that's going to get more gamers into these communities, give developers more opportunities to target them. I think that's super-healthy as well."

→ Old box, new tricks

All this is not to say that the Xbox One you currently own has nothing more to give – far from it. The likes of *Rise of the Tomb Raider* and *Halo 5* represent a substantial technical leap over the launch games, but this year's Xbox One games may leave them in the dust.

"Developers are having more time with the box, and we've done some things to help them get even better performance, and we've been pleased with that," comments Aaron Greenberg, head of Xbox marketing.

"I think what the team at 343 Industries accomplished with *Halo 5*, with the variable display resolution and locking the framerate, that's something we've had a good response to, both from players and the more technical reviewers," he goes on. "We're seeing more developers doing things like that." The 2015 launch of DirectX 12 – the latest incarnation of Microsoft's application programming interface – helps Xbox One developers use the console's processors more efficiently. "As Windows continues to innovate with graphics and the foundations of games, that will carry over to console as well, because it's a Windows 10 device," notes Ybarra.

In the short to medium term, the rise of the Universal Windows Platform will lead to

Mind shrinking the Xbox One while you're overhauling it, Microsoft? Our TV table is packed

LEFT It's kinda speculative, but console upgrades could open the way for virtual reality games on Xbox One.



Achievement unlocked

4 High earners

Xbox One's new features could be the first step to a new generation of achievements based on for



“As Windows continues to innovate with graphics and foundations, that will carry over to console as well”

more PC games on console and vice versa – Remedy's *Quantum Break* is among the first to ship for both simultaneously. Some fans believe this makes Xbox One exclusives feel less, well, exclusive, but the benefits are hard to dispute. Firstly, you'll only have to buy one version of a cross-platform Microsoft game, and you'll be able to carry over save files, leaderboard rankings and the like between versions. Secondly, a newly unified Windows and Xbox market means more customers for developers, and more customers equals more games being made.



→ Sharing and caring

Universal Windows applications also allow for PC-vs-Xbox multiplayer as standard, though there are still differences of interface to wrangle with. “Do I matchmaking with controller-only, keyboard-only, or am I just

going to play everybody?” asks Ybarra. “We’re constantly working through those issues, but the core proposition is a bigger community to play with, and more games to engage with.”

Ybarra says that in practice, the majority of PC and Xbox players are happy to share their toys. “What we find is there’s a smaller percentage of players who are very vocal, on console and on PC. ‘It’s my platform or the highway and I hope everyone else dies.’ But the good news is that the other 90% or so are like ‘yeah, let’s make this easier, you know what, I’m

okay if someone can play all their games and I get to play their games, because we’re just gamers and this is a hobby we all enjoy.’ That is very motivating for us. It really drives the strategy and the planning that Phil, myself and others are doing, as we kind of tape these communities together.”

The tantalizing prospect of a tooled-up Xbox One aside, the attraction of the Universal Windows Platform is simply that it’s a passionate attempt to keep hold of the past, to ensure that acclaimed artworks and their communities stay afloat across generations of hardware. With new gaming devices launching all the time, and so many games being published online, the industry faces a real problem of preservation – shut down a digital storefront or parachute a new platform into the mix, and hundreds of games may be lost or forgotten.

“Every time a generation shift happens it invalidates every game you’ve ever purchased,” comments Phil Spencer. “Which isn’t great for gamers. It’s great for innovation but it’s not great that it invalidates all your games.”

In building a bridge between Xbox One and PC, Microsoft hope to create a more enduring culture for games in general. It’s hard to argue with the idea. We can’t wait to hear more.



If you're hungry for new game hints, keep an eye on Phil Spencer's T-shirts at E3

Gamers first

Head of Xbox [Phil Spencer](#) and head of Xbox game marketing [Aaron Greenberg](#) reflect on Xbox One's incredible 2015, and shed light on 2016's exclusives

Winter 2015 was a busy season for Xbox One. How did it all go?

Aaron Greenberg I think we feel really good about delivering an extremely high quality games line-up on time. *Rare Replay*, *Gears of War: Ultimate Edition*, *Forza Motorsport 6*, *Halo 5: Guardians* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* all launched on time, and all of them hit 80+ on Metacritic. Overall, we saw our exclusive line up grow significantly year over year – we had double-digit growth. Our Xbox One console sales continue to track ahead of where Xbox 360 was at the same point in time, and we've had record engagement and usage on Xbox Live. In January, people spent over one billion hours on Xbox Live, which is a new milestone for us. So we're really pleased.

How did *Rise of the Tomb Raider* do?

AG With *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, one thing we learned is that when seven AAA titles launch in a four-week window – that's *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, *Halo 5: Guardians*, *Call of Duty: Black Ops III*, *Fallout 4*, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, *Need for Speed* and *Star Wars: Battlefront* – games that most people want to play, that compression definitely creates some market dynamics. But what we've seen is that in December and even January, some of those titles really

come back, which had been lost in the shuffle. We're pleased. Relative to our internal projections, our software sales are strong. *Rise of the Tomb Raider* had a big December and is doing well outside the US – that franchise is huge in Europe. I know our partners at Square Enix were pleased, and the PC launch has gone well too.

Halo 5's campaign attracted some criticism. Have you considered releasing a multiplayer-only Halo?

Phil Spencer The story of Halo is important to that franchise, so I would be hesitant to stop doing single player and telling the stories of the Spartans, because I think for a lot of people it is about those stories, those characters. It was kind of born that way – the first *Halo* didn't have multiplayer unless you wired your consoles together.

Clearly, the multiplayer of any of these games is what keeps people playing today – launch buyers consume the single player fairly quickly, and all the people who are playing now are playing Warzone, Big Team Battle, Firefight. So in terms of where you invest, the areas where you need to innovate, I feel really good about 343's plan, what they're implementing for *Halo 5's* multiplayer. But I think the single-player campaign is important to Halo.

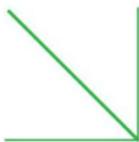
Would you ever consider doing what Activision's trying with *Black Ops III* on PC, and sell *Halo 5's* multiplayer as a separate product?

PS I'm curious to see how that works. That's an interesting experiment, and I want to see whether it brings in more customers. Are people happy with it? Does it deliver on what they want? That's a great thing about the games industry – people are always trying new things, and we keep our eyes open and try to learn from the best.

Will 2016's Xbox One line up be as strong as last year's?

AG We're expecting to have many more games than we did last year, even coming off what we dubbed the greatest games line-up in Xbox history – we're reaching that sweet spot in the generation where you've got really strong console sales, developers have had a lot of time to work on the hardware. One thing we're thinking about is we should avoid launching all these games in the same window. We're going to try to spread things out a bit more, be more deliberate about that.

It used to be that if you couldn't launch a game or a movie in a holiday, it wouldn't break through, but we're seeing top box office movies now are from February to May, and we've seen the same in the games industry. *The Witcher 3* launched in March, *Dying Light* launched in January, we had a lot of success in August with both *Rare Replay* and *Gears*, so we're thinking about the full year. We talked about *Scalebound*, for example – how we don't need that this holiday with



BELOW Following the success of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft are open to more third-party deals.

054



Achievement unlocked

5 Power of the crowd

As of January 2016, there are 48 million active Xbox Live users.

→ Got something you want us to investigate? Tell us at oxm@futurenet.com



Achievement unlocked

6 Nobody left behind

At the time of writing, backwards compatibility supports 134 titles.

everything else coming, so we have that next spring, which gives Kamiyasan and the team at Platinum a little more time to work on that ambitious title. We want to be able to give gamers an incredible line up of great titles, but also the time to play them.

Can you reveal anything about *Gears 4* and how it fits into the line up?

AG The Coalition are innovating with *Gears* in a lot of really exciting ways. We're doing a beta this spring to let customers get a taste of *Gears 4* multiplayer, and I think there'll be a lot of innovation. I'm in the awkward position of knowing a lot of the innovations that they're building into the game – unfortunately I can't reveal them! But I think *Gears* fans shouldn't worry, the franchise is in good hands. It is going to be a mega, mega release, arguably the biggest exclusive title of the year, and we'll be definitely sharing more at E3.

The *Ultimate Edition* has performed extremely well for us. The thing about *Gears* players is that they are one of our most passionate fanbases – when we put up a video or something on social media, the amount of interactions from fans is some of the highest we see of any franchise. At the same time, we've seen a huge influx of new fans – 45% of all the people that have played *Gears* this holiday are new to the franchise, so we're also bringing in a whole new generation, which I think sets us up nicely for the *Gears 4* launch this holiday.

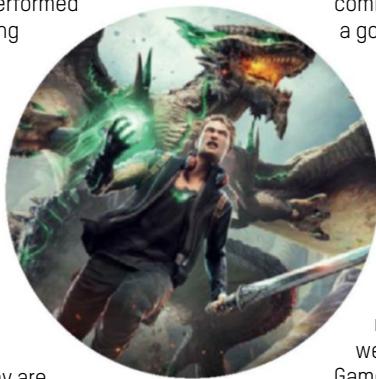
PS *Gears* is a good third-person shooter, and we don't really have a good third-person shooter – *Crackdown* is a shooter that takes mobility to a different level, whereas *Gears* is very deliberately paced. I want to make sure it stays true to that, and I just got to see *Gears 4* this week, actually, I sat down with Rod, and I'm really happy with it – feels like it's going back to its roots a little. I also love the reaction we've had to the *Ultimate Edition*. A lot of people



ABOVE *Halo Wars 2* has a "Kylo Ren"-style baddy, apparently. Will it trump the Didact?

were too young when the original games came out, now they're playing the earlier *Gears* through backwards compatibility. It's a good investment.

I think the multiplayer around *Gears* has things that are unique from the twitch factor of a *Call of Duty* or *Halo* – I don't think there are a lot of multiplayer shooters that feel the way *Gears* does. So investing in future *Gears* and making sure that the multiplayer side as well as the campy comic-book story [doesn't vanish], is a good decision. I'm proud to have it.



How is *Halo Wars 2* shaping up? Is it aimed more at your PC audience than console?

AG *Halo Wars* was a bit of an experiment, right? It was bringing an RTS to console. It is still to date the best-selling RTS ever on console, and it was our number one most-requested game – when we announced *Halo Wars 2* at Gamescom, people went crazy. We set records for the number of people that watched that video, it was like we broke the gaming internet with that. So it was just really exciting to see, and [to your question] we're trying to walk the line. We really want it to be a very approachable, fun game for console gamers, but also we're working with developers, The Creative Assembly, who have an incredible pedigree with strategy on PC, so we think we'll have a pretty big audience there. I'm really excited. We have a much more sophisticated villain and so I think, kind of an evolution there. I've always wished that *Halo* had a Kylo Ren or Darth Vader [equivalent] – well, we have that character now. **OXM**



VR READY

While work continues on the pioneering HoloLens headset for Windows, Microsoft are taking a wait-and-see attitude towards virtual reality devices on consoles – they have partnered with Facebook and Oculus to ship the Xbox One PC controller with the Rift headset, but have no plans to support Oculus on Xbox One itself. That said, Mike Ybarra and his team are already looking at how creating Oculus Rift software might influence interface design at large. "We've been talking to them about what it means when you put that Rift on, the game scenario that you get. Everybody wants a Holodeck and as engineers, we all would love to deliver that!

"I don't think there's going to be a Holodeck anytime soon," he cautions, nipping our dreams of an Xbox IllumiRoom revival in the bud. "But the technology changes so fast. I think it's just staying on top of that technology curve and surprising customers." In a telling move, Microsoft opted to show off the Oculus Rift version of *Minecraft* at their Xbox Spring Showcase. We had a quick go on it and it made us heartily ill, thanks to jumpy camera control. On the plus side, *Minecraft's* timeless cuboid visuals scrub up beautifully in "true" 3D.

ENTER THE MATRIX





NEXT MONTH

We carve open the
brains of the Gears of
War 4 team, spend an
entire month living on
Xbox One and deliver
the final verdict on
Dark Souls III, Doom
and Battleborn*

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REVIEWS



REVIEW

Definitive reviews for April

How would you rate our redesign issue so far? I'm getting an 8/10 vibe



It used to be that studios colored inside the lines and made games that slotted into friendly genres. Nowadays, they've gone full Doctor Moreau, fusing ideas into startling hybrids – **The Division** (p68) is *Destiny* meets Ghost Recon meets a potent bout of the flu – or abandoning virtual worlds entirely. Are we even equipped to review the mixed-media 'thing' that is **Quantum Break** (p60) or should we airlift in a colleague from *Total Film* to sit by our side and help score the filmed sequences? Our review vocabulary definitely needs to improve. 'Check out the animation on living human, Lance Reddick!' – it just doesn't work, right? Then there are the games that only dip a toe in our hard drives. **Hitman** (p64) is the Schrödinger's cat of game releases: delivered in tiny chunks over six months, it is somehow both on sale and not on sale at the same time. Some fans don't want this shift. They see developers turning to gimmicks instead of doing what they've always done best. But could it be that they are simply finding new ways to express those cherished ideas? Remedy still know how to make a man die spectacularly, whether or not it happens in polygons. And what is IO's global drip-feed if not a chance to squeeze every drop of fun/blood from peerless level design? No, the only real victims in this are lazy videogame critics, no longer able to sneer at tired formulas. Thank god.



060



064



067



068



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Quantum Break

THE BEST TEMPORAL THRILLER SINCE BLINX **TOM STONE**



061

It was the first Xbox One game we ever saw, yet even three years later, we still knew so little about what *Quantum Break*

actually was right up to the moment we played it. Is it an alternative vision of what all Xbox One games were once intended to be? A glimpse at the future of interactive storytelling thanks to an innovative cocktail of live-action film segments and gameplay? Or a car crash destined to please no one?

In the end, it's a slightly muddled multimedia hybrid: a mix of stodgy television show, enough text to fill an okay book and one of the most flamboyant shooters we've played. The story of Jack Joyce is a power fantasy like no other – an accident with a time machine granting him six powers, five of which enable the most fun you'll have with a game this year.

Time Stop lets Joyce throw down a sphere of stopped time, freezing any

ABOVE Hundreds of Time Stops later and the trick is still not getting old.

BELOW The hefty Juggernauts are weak in the back. Sounds obvious, but it's a great test of Joyce's dashing powers.



enemies trapped inside the bubble. A bubble you can fill with machine gun rounds and shotgun blasts to your heart's content, then watch as time restarts. Everything you've fired slams into the enemy simultaneously, sending them flying, the trails of your bullet storm still lingering in the air. It looks amazing, feels even better and is completely OTT. We might be in love.

Quantum brake

Time Rush is even better. You hold the trigger to freeze enemies as you dash around the room at, from their perspective, superhuman speeds. Either use this advantage to get a better position, or run up to foes and deliver a teeth-rattling punch to the face. It's suicidally stupid behavior – a takedown depletes your Time Rush and leaves you exposed to your victim's friends – but we constantly rushed up to slap enemies about anyway, lead-riddled consequences be damned. It's that kind of game.

More hesitant tactics are born from Time Shield, a wall of paused air around Joyce that catches bullets in mid-air for a few split seconds, giving you enough of a breather to figure out your next move. Time Dodge is a quick burst of impossible speed – not so long that you can run rings around foes, but enough to nip behind the nearest cover. Although his powers offer all the defensive options you'll need, Jack is very comfortable around cover; the way he automatically ducks brings to mind *Tomb Raider's* context-sensitive cowering, and is just as well done here. He makes for a pleasingly fleet-footed hero all round.

Elsewhere, Joyce's Time Vision is just *Arkham Knight's* detective vision, the screen turning black and white, with the exception of enemies and points of interest. Time Blast is your nuclear option. Aim, charge, then fire a temporal frag grenade, killing anything in its path and sealing foes in the moment of their death.



→ All powers run on strict cooldowns, Time Blast taking roughly five years to recharge, stopping overreliance. This might be Remedy's most impressive bit of game design – they hand Jack the abilities of a time-meddling god, but never stop you feeling vulnerable. Get complacent against even a pair of goons and you're only an idle mistake away from staring at the long loading screen again. A fate worse than death.

The enemy AI does a good job of keeping the pressure up by lobbing grenades and spreading out to make sure Joyce never stays in cover for too long. They're a formidable test of your powers, making it all the more satisfying when you do manage to

Time Blast, Stop and Rush through an area without taking a bullet. We can't recall a game that's had us bellowing "Xbox, record that!" more. Even rare moments without the powers work, with *Break's* snappy guns and slow-motion killcam (straight out of *Max Payne*) delivering a punchy shooter. Thankfully, it rarely resorts to taking your toys away, instead encouraging time-meddling indulgence, or even adding environmental enhancements such as barrels that temporarily pause entire areas when destroyed.

The story setup for all this time-manipulating madness? Jack Joyce (*X-Men 2's* Shawn Ashmore) visits the lab of his old friend, Paul Serene

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

Shooter where you can slow, speed and break the laws of time.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Being Neo in *The Matrix*, but with pacing issues worthy of *The Matrix* sequels.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Writers nearing the deadline for their redesigned Xbox mag, who dream of being able to stop time.

(*Game of Thrones'* Aidan Gillen), who's built himself a time machine. Testing the device goes horribly wrong, triggering a quantum break which will eventually cause all time to stop completely, but which also gives Joyce and Serene time powers. You win some, you lose some, right? Suddenly, Serene's lab is rushed by armed soldiers working for the sinister Monarch Solutions, a company being run by an older, battle-hardened Paul Serene, who's now the antagonist.

Tough break

Confused? Get used to that. Remedy's tangled sci-fi tale would take another 10,000 words and several flow charts to properly deduce. The intricacies of what happened when, who's side everyone is on and who actually is and isn't a mole at Monarch Solutions (seriously, that company really needs to start background checking its new staff) is complicated to say the least.

The core is that Joyce is trying to stop the end of time, whereas Serene thinks it's an inevitability, and is trying to stop Jack. It's a story that's often in danger of drowning in plot holes and technobabble, kept afloat by a strong sense of humor, likable characters and occasionally brilliant set-pieces.

The quantum break, you see, is causing 'stutters', moments where parts of time are frozen and others are looping endlessly. At one point a



LEFT The bland location choices hurt it, but the rich lighting and effects make it one of Xbox One's prettiest games.



ABOVE The facial animation is so good, the live-action scenes seem pointless.

LEFT Stutters freeze enemies in the moment they perish. A pretty death.

boat sails into a suspension bridge, sending debris and vehicles flying through the air, which repeats over and over as time throws a hissy fit. Joyce has to use his powers to dodge past obstacles and freeze looping vehicles to create mid-air platforms.

It's visually stunning and not a bad idea, but platforming is ropier than the gunplay. Joyce can be fussy about what constitutes a platform he'll climb on to, preferring instead to fall to his death. It's underwhelming to execute several Monarch grunts as a time-twisting superhero, only to immediately perish because the same deity can't handle a simple ledge. Even when it works perfectly, the platforming sequences are linear, lacking the freedom and possibilities that make the combat sing.

Still, at least platforming sections have drive. Story-focused sequences where you shadow characters as they rattle off exposition feel stodgier than the similar doses of storytelling in *Alan Wake*. You'll be checking your watch, struggling to remember when you last got to enjoy a firefight.

They'd probably feel shorter were it not for the mountains of flavor text you find in emails, notes and diaries in every level. A lot of it's well written and worth reading, shedding light on characters and enhancing the story, but it really needed an editor to cut them down. A run through a Monarch office becomes a slog as you can barely move without another wordy email slowing the pace to a crawl.

But they're nothing on *Quantum's* most misguided creative decision, the

STAR POWER

Shawn Ashmore is excellent as Jack Joyce. Sarcastic but never smug, driven by revenge but still capable of cracking a smile, he's far more upbeat than Max Payne and Alan Wake ever were. Shame about Aidan Gillen's performance – not so much 'check please' as 'hmm, I wonder what accent I'll attempt this take?'



"Remedy give you the abilities of a time-meddling god, but keep you feeling vulnerable"

inclusion of four live-action episodes of an in-game TV show. These episodes break up the action, in much the same way a drinking problem breaks up a happy marriage. Episodes portray events from the villains' perspectives. They're fairly tedious, burdening a decent cast with clichéd scripts and weak dialogue (the dip in quality from the in-game writing is noticeable).

Even if Remedy had made the next *Breaking Bad*, we'd still wonder why we're watching TV in the middle of a game. It's a counterintuitive gimmick, adding a few minor story details at the expense of all the game's momentum. Interactive storytelling's next big step isn't to 'make the cutscenes longer', and *Break* had enough pacing issues before it forced us to put the controller down for 20-plus minutes at a time.

The moral maze

One storytelling idea we do enjoy are the preludes to these episodes, where you briefly control Paul Serene. You're presented with a choice – a 'junction point' – that affects the game and the show going forward. Early on, for example, Serene must decide whether to kill a witness to Monarch's crimes, potentially damaging the company's

reputation as they're suspected of a cover up, or blackmail her into a PR smear campaign against Jack Joyce, reviving public faith in Monarch and making Joyce out to be a terrorist. Serene's powers offer glimpses into the pros and cons of both futures, a smart insight into the mind of a villain far more morally complex than the average videogame adversary.

These we liked, but otherwise we want to recommend skipping the episodes and flavor text to keep the long stretches without combat to a minimum. We *want to*, but we can't, as doing so would make the story even harder to follow and engage with. A second playthrough is the ideal way to tackle *Quantum Break*.

Time powers are still awesome, the live-action sections can be ignored entirely, and the rippling fallout of Serene's choices will be easier to spot. It's worth replaying just for another Stop, Rush and Blast through some of most satisfying gunplay on Xbox One – ramp up the difficulty and really put it to the test. Just be prepared to sift through some sluggish storytelling to see it. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

Time powers are a fun step forward, but pacing issues keep the story firmly in the past.

8



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Hitman

RUTHLESSLY/RUEFULLY EXECUTED. (DELETE AS APPROPRIATE) ALEX DALE

Talk about dumb ways to die: *Hitman's* opening mission, which takes place during a couture fashion show in full swing, is packed to the rafters with 'em. Like, literally – crank the right winch and you can send an elaborate lighting rig crashing onto the packed catwalk below to a chorus of screams.

That's just one of many reasons why the mission's title, 'The Showstopper', is an apt one. Tumbling loudspeakers, poisoned cocktails, balcony falls, toilet bowl drownings, electrical mishaps – there's so many ways to knock your socialite targets off the mortal coil it'll make the coroner's head spin. Wait, that's another one: a twisted neck.

It is, in other words, *Hitman* at its freeform, devious best. Forget *Hitman: Absolution* and its ill-advised attempt to turn the series into an action film. Forget 'sexy' nuns, forget snapping a man's neck in front of thousands in a wrestling ring, heck, forget your own name if you have to. This is the true

sequel to *Hitman: Blood Money* that we've waited a decade for.

"Whoa, back up the truck there a second, Alex," you might say. "Isn't it a bit early to be dropping pipebombs like that? After all, this latest entry is drip-fed episodically over the next six months. So far you've only played the contents of the intro pack – which consists of two training missions and the aforementioned 'Showstopper' – and the first of its five DLC chunks, set in Sapienza, a sun-drenched Italian coastal town. How could you know?"

Well, thank you, Dr Exposition. Two things: 1) How do you know so much about me, get away from my trash cans, and 2) True. But what's being a silent assassin about, if not having the confidence to run with a hunch?

Killer instinct

Sure, there's the possibility that one or more of the four remaining missions will be a stinker. But I've seen nothing so far to set my suspicion cones a-rising – in fact, everything points to this being the entry where this unique

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

Thrilling run of covert murders where you rub shoulders with assassination targets. Cruel.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

The crisp gunplay and movement of *Absolution*, married with the sandbox puzzling of *Hitman's* yore.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Perfectionists. If the notion of replaying the same hit over and over bristles, it may not be for you.

series, forever hamstrung by its own ambition, finally brings its potential together and executes the perfect hit.

Take the AI, which has long been a sticking point, as an example. Even in celebrated entries such as *Silent Assassin*, it was impossible to predict completely how passers-by would react. Often guards would open fire on you just for breaking into a jog. Here, you can set your watch by the NPC behavior, which is useful, as perfect hits depend on everything running like clockwork.

Enemies that will see through your disguise are marked with a white dot above their head. It's an elegant solution that's used logically – if you're disguised as a workman, say, close colleagues will notice something's up, but contractors on the other side of the map will be oblivious. Since everyone behaves in a predictable manner, you soon learn how to manipulate them to your benefit – leaving a pistol lying on the floor will cause a member of the public to scurry off to the nearest



LEFT Unseen by partygoers, in the top floor of the mansion a secret auction sells secrets to the world's elite.

“The measure of a good Hitman level is in how many ways there are to reach your goal”

guard, for example, moving those chess pieces around and allowing you to sneak into new areas.

The measure of a good Hitman level is in how many ways there are to reach your goal. Delivering the death blow is but a small piece of the puzzle. The bulk of your time is spent studying your target's behavior patterns and working out how to isolate them from the crowds – something that can be as simple as overflowing a sink, or as elaborate as triggering a mass evacuation. To move freely around different parts of the level you need to source disguises – either from locker rooms or from the back of a still-warm corpse.

Tools of the trade

Some murderous props are more organic. Explosive propane tanks, for example, can be strategically placed around the level and detonated at will. This hints at the real reason for the episodic delivery mechanism, and why all its levels are so vast and sprawling: each level is custom built

FAR LEFT A neat leveling system rewards you with new weapons and spawn points for executing varied assassinations.

RIGHT An area set in a mock-up of an airfield proves Hitman levels don't have to be huge to be great.



HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Hardcore Hitman fans will have the Elusive Targets in their sights. These are one-time only hits that drop a new character into the level; you have 48 hours to kill them, and only one chance. Compounding matters, the target won't be highlighted in-game – you'll have to run with the mug shot on the briefing screen.

for replayability. Approaching each stage's core contract from fresh angles is inarguably compelling – *Hitman* brings out the perfectionist in everyone, of course. But the depth of the level design only truly reveals itself in side-contracts that remix the level by changing the target. The Escalation Contracts are particularly compulsive; a hit that has to be repeated five times, under increasingly demanding conditions. By variation number five you gain a whole new appreciation of the stage's complexity, and it's satisfying to watch yourself breeze through tasks that caused you no end of problems when you first began.

If there's a criticism to be made, it's that the unique delivery structure demands all the levels to be huge – but historically, bigger hasn't always meant better in *Hitman*,

and the two training levels (set in slyly funny re-enactments of famous historical hits) show there's still room for more compact stalking grounds.

What I've played of *Sapienza* in particular wilts under its sheer size; effectively a functioning mini-town, it's an ordeal just tracking down your targets. But that's a small price to pay for a beautifully executed stealth game. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT
Agent 47 lines up the perfect hit. We hope future missions live up to early promise.



Alekhine's Gun

LESS A HITMAN, MORE A ("TWITMAN" - PROFANITY ED) ALEX DALE

Tell you what, you don't need the eyes of a hawk to see through *Alekhine's Gun's* disguise – this is about as blatant a rip-off of the *Hitman* series as you're ever likely to find. That should be a good thing: *Hitman* games are great, and far-and-few between, so the more the merrier, right? Wrong-o.

Turns out that they're also really hard to put together, and having played through bargain bin stinkers like *Velvet Assassin* and *Dark* over the years, we had our stink-tongs at the ready while tentatively placing *Alekhine's Gun* in our disc drive. And sure as night follows day, this is a howler of epic proportions; a niggly, frustrating, nonsensical stealth game that plays out like a compilation tape of Agent 47's worst hits.

The storyline flits between the 1960s and World War II, while the gameplay remains marooned in 2002. In our *Hitman* review (page 64) we talk of the clumsiness of earlier *Hitmans*, and this game is kinda like a Wikipedia page about the subject brought to life. Fiber-wire and melee weapon controls are unwieldy and imprecise, as are the menus that are used to flit between them, often causing perfectly-timed stealth runs to turn comically sour.

Level layouts are dull, illogical and almost stripped bare of tactical possibilities – in contrast to *Hitman's* multi-layered designs, here there are only a few routes to the finish line. Not that it's keen to signpost them;



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RIGHT If you can't procure a disguise, stealth is an option – but enemies won't hesitate to fire if you're rumbled.

BELOW "Here's that bottle of ass controls you ordered, sir".

short cut

WHAT IS IT? Obvious *Hitman* clone set during cheery historical moments such as the killing of JFK.

WHAT'S IT LIKE? Clunky, like trying to lug a closet up stairs, except if any neighbor sees you, you're going to die.

WHO'S IT FOR? A good question I don't have an answer for. Maybe Guantanamo Bay would be interested?



"If you put this game's AI in a bird, it would fly backwards"

your radar is about as much use as an outboard motor is to a raccoon. It can be used to steer you in the right general direction, but it's often unclear who your target is or where you should be going. It lifts *Hitman's* 'Instinct' mode wholesale (hold down RB and everyone around you begins to glow so you can get your bearings) but is unnecessarily stingy about how often you can use it. And whoever decided to map crouching and whistling cues to the opposing thumbsticks deserves to have a chandelier dropped on their head, particularly as whistling is punishable by death around these parts.

Gun control

Which brings us neatly to the biggest failing. If a stealth game's AI is fun to play around with, then it can mask a multitude of flaws, but *Alekhine's Gun's* enemies are catastrophically, yet unpredictably dim. Seriously, if you put this game's AI into a bird, it would fly backwards. Characters stick rigidly to their movement patterns and

become suspicious for reasons that are never clear, giving chase for as long as it takes you to close a door in their face. Door knobs are a complete mystery to them.

Gaming the AI like this isn't just an exploit – it's practically essential, because there are so few methods for killing targets, and waiting for them to get into position can take forever. All the while, guards are sniffing you with suspicion like you've stepped in dog poop (which would explain the brown-smearing visuals, at least). A defining difference between this and *Hitman* is that there's little hope of improvising if (when?) things go south – while Agent 47 can shoot his way out of Dodge and regroup with a little skill, here the gunplay is so wonky you might as well hit the restart button. It all adds up to a bland, irritating knock-off that will leave even the most ardent stealth fan unsatisfied. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT
Dreary and glitchy, a reminder that *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* isn't as good as you recall.



PUBLISHER CODEMASTERS / DEVELOPER CODEMASTERS / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$59.99

Dirt Rally

MORE MCRAE THAN DIRT, THE SERIES RETURNS TO ITS ROOTS JUSTIN TOWELL

If you miss the old Colin McRae Rally games, the next sentence will make you squeal like an Impreza on a Monaco

hairpin: *Dirt Rally* is the best rally sim the world has ever seen. This is it, Codies achieved it: Virtual Rally-ty.

Just as serious and hardcore a sim as previously seen on PC, *Dirt Rally* effectively transforms your sofa into a professional rally car. Add a good third-party wheel and pedals and it may as well be the real thing. Perhaps predictably, seeing as real rallying is exceptionally difficult and only practiced by professional maniacs, you will have your ass politely handed to you over and over again while you learn how to drive a real rally car.

The situations you'll face aren't gamey at all. You'll find yourself reversing out of a farmer's field, cursing whoever decided rear-wheel drive and rallying should ever be mentioned in the same sentence. You'll smash into a gatepost because the exquisite water splash effect leaves you blind until the wipers kick in. And then you'll watch footage of real-life rallying on YouTube and snootily sniff "well he took *that* a bit cautiously". Suddenly you understand rallying because you feel like you've really done it. It's everything Xbox One driving games threatened to be.

Engine repairs

That Xbox One difference extends to the visuals too. Forest scenes are packed with detail, and the helicopter tracking shots in replays are immense. Aside from some flat-looking trees in the middle-distance and occasional low-res dappled shadows sulling the track, it's a gorgeous-looking game.

Since the driving demands total concentration, each run is exhausting at around 10 minutes apiece. And with limited repair time only available after each couple of stages, a single mistake can easily destroy your chances of a win. And don't think Codemasters' trademark time-rewinding flashbacks will save

RIGHT Classic cars, like this Alpine A110, are available for you to smash up.



short cut

WHAT IS IT?

Rally cars driving realistically on narrow roads. And crashing.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Watching dad's dash cam footage of his Sunday drive, only played back at 4x speed.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Serious rally fans. They asked and asked for it, and now they can stop moaning.

"You will have your ass handed to you while you learn to drive a rally car"

you – in a strikingly bold move, they're gone. You can restart as many times as you like, but you'll lose a chunk of bonus winnings every time you do.

Money is important. It's used to hire better mechanics to fix your ride, purchase new cars and buy mechanics perks, which unlock as you progress. You even have to pay for damage at the end of each stage (the game helpfully suggests you 'don't break an expensive bit' – er, thanks for that). You can also gamble your winnings on online leaderboard events, which is a fun touch. Daily, weekly and monthly challenges are all on offer, and you can create leagues with custom rules for your friends thanks to full RaceNet integration.

Hit the dirt

While traditional rallying is undoubtedly the meat of the game, there's also the full, infamous Pikes Peak Hill Climb to tackle, as well as close-contact Rallycross racing. Both are available right from the start. Rallycross should, by rights,

feel like old *Dirt*, but it doesn't. These races are oddly unsatisfying, with underwhelming collisions, racing and circuit design. It's good to know the engine can 'do' close-contact racing, but it's nowhere near as convincing as the rallying. That's something we never expected to be saying about a *Dirt* title.

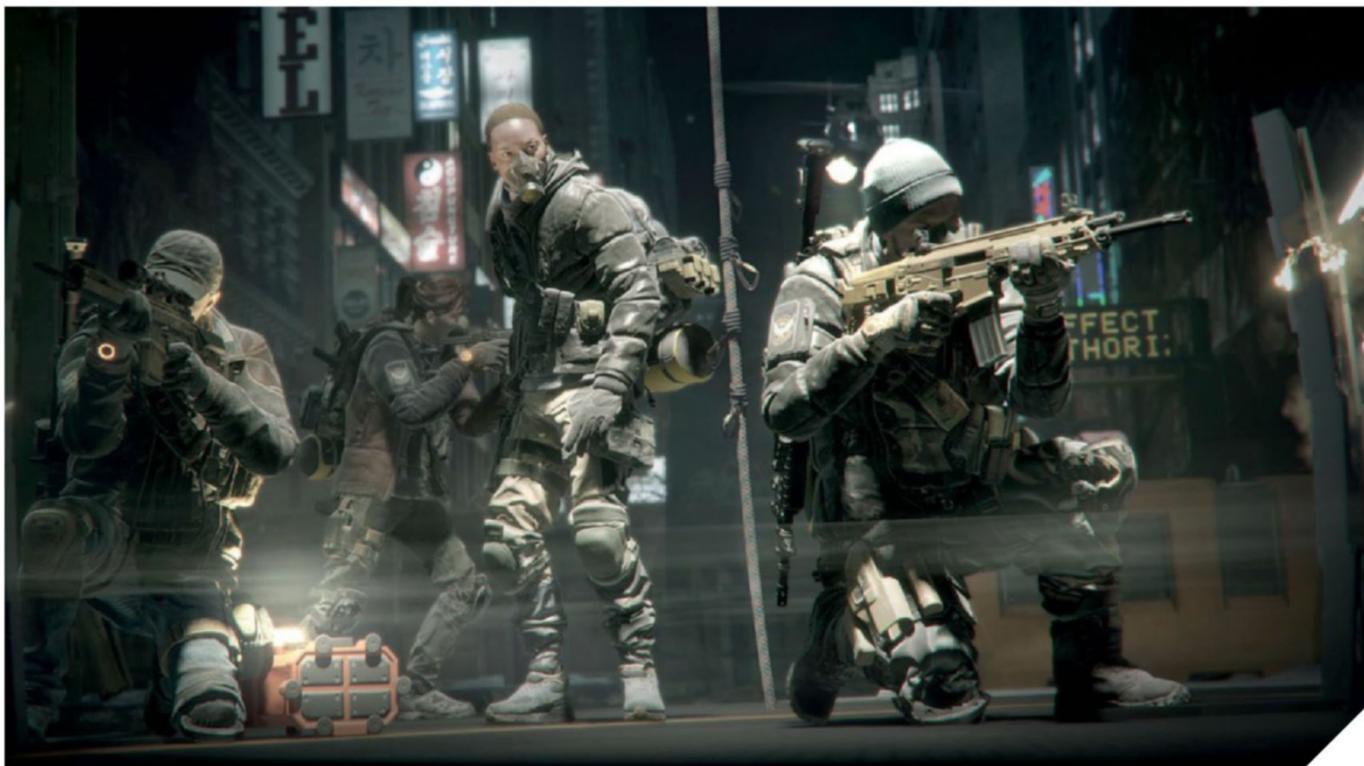
If you aren't a hardcore rally fan and are lamenting the lack of 'old' *Dirt* on your Xbox One, we feel that pain too. But with the hooliganistic frivolities cast aside, in their place stands a genre-defining, premium-quality offering that's ready to open your eyes to the possibilities of Xbox One driving. If you normally just like to hold accelerate and hope for the best, this probably isn't for you. Look elsewhere. If, however, the thought of breathless, ultra-realistic, edge-of-control driving excites you, you need to get on this right now. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

Without question the best rally sim ever made. Reality without the whiplash.

9



PUBLISHER UBISOFT / DEVELOPER UBISOFT MASSIVE / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$59.99

Tom Clancy's The Division

A GAME ALL ABOUT TEAMWORK. SO GOOD JOB ON THAT TITLE **TOM STONE**

It's difficult to deny you're a nerd in our line of work, but *The Division* has pushed us over the edge.

It's got us obsessed

with numbers. We used to sneer at math while pulling off blood-soaked headshots in the likes of *CoD*. Thanks to *The Division*, we're now squealing over every increased damage value we blast out of crooks. A five-figure headshot is tasty enough to make us cheer "numbers are our friends!" in earshot of the office bullies. The wedgies were brutal and many.

A shooter wherein enemies can dismiss multiple bullets to the skull sounds broken on paper: an RPG-style damage system being shoehorned into a genre it doesn't belong in. But in practice this demands more skill than traditional shooters. Any idiot can pull off a lucky headshot. *The*

ABOVE New York is ridiculously detailed, right down to billboards and signs.



Division demands many accurate hits to take down its biggest threats, so there's little room for anything but consistent sharpshooting. It's a slower approach to damage that fits neatly with the more long-term strategic nature of a cover shooter. You gain ground, control space and take shots when opportunities rise, but have to make them count and not let them compromise your defense.

The grounded loadout suits more RPG-style play. Rifles are your heavy attacks, doing massive damage, but are riskier to line up, keeping you out of cover for longer. Machine guns are mid-range, with wild sprays capable of doing some damage, and pistols are your last resort. Unlockable skills such as improved accuracy and plantable turrets are your status buffs. Played in this mindset, *The Division* sometimes feels like playing a version of XCOM where combatants have broken the

turn-based spell and are enjoying the freedom of shooting whenever the hell they like. Not that movement ever feels that rigid. A crisp cover system makes it easy to dart across New York's deserted streets in even the most hectic gunfights. There's a hint of Splinter Cell's more recent predatory stealth in the way you can highlight another vantage point then dash to it, releasing the button if you need a change of strategy mid-sprint.

New York is a ghost town because The Scarecrow's fear toxin is... wait... sorry, wrong game. A deadly virus has wiped out most of the city's population. Yes, that's it. You're a Division agent, tasked with taking out rioters, criminals, and those looking to exploit the outbreak for shadier ends. But don't expect any subterfuge or undercover investigation. This is a shooter to the core, almost never more complicated than find-the-





→ dudes-shoot-the-dudes-save-the-day-hooray. Strong core gunplay and excellent mission design meant we spent days in *The Division* before this was a problem. Story missions hide the repetition with furious pacing that rushes you through a generous variety of abandoned police stations, blood-smearing shopping malls and far more interiors than we expected. New York's streets themselves are stunning, with a ludicrous amount of varied set dressing ensuring no two are the same, but it's the constant trips into the city's poisoned innards that keep *The Division* feeling fresh.

Divide and conquer

Missions are suicidal alone, so luckily it's a blast with friends and strangers alike (being able to matchmaking with strangers in story missions is a huge advantage this has over the similar *Destiny*). Finding a team is fast, and bar occasionally knocking heads with other agents trying to hog the same cover, environments are designed with teamwork in mind. Reviving downed agents is easy, loot is accessible to all and XP for kills is paid in full to every member of the gang. Leave treachery to the Dark Zone (more on that later); story tasks are all about camaraderie.

Completing missions levels you up, letting you festoon avatars with better weapons and armor. There are 15 key missions, with the recommended

“Enter the Dark Zone with a team that you trust, because here you murder players”

level usually upping by two each time. This is a doddle until level 12, but after that, any mission you attempt above your station hits you with a difficulty spike the size of the Empire State Building. Armored goons eat bullets, barely taking a scratch, with named boss characters proving near invincible. It's our fault for jumping the gun, but we wouldn't have done it if *The Division's* other XP grinds were more interesting.

Safe houses dot Manhattan, where you can buy gear, meet agents and check the local situation board to fill the map with side missions. Call it a 'situation board' all you want, we know a radio tower or Creed viewpoint when we see one. This is the 4,366th Ubisoft open world this year (it feels like), and retains some of their more irritating habits. Side missions include activating machinery, by shooting the goons defending it, or researching the virus by finding data and uploading it to the cloud, while shooting the goons defending

ABOVE Some rioters run up to you with axes, apparently unfamiliar with how guns work.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

Take a holiday in post-apocalyptic New York, picking its bones clean of guns and clothes.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

A tactical cover shooter, but more accessible, with perfect controls and tight gunplay.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone with three friends who also think petty crime should carry the death penalty.

it. Hostage rescues prove that silent protagonists make terrible negotiators, as you shoot yet more goons and set hostages free at the end. The majority of side missions follow this bland formula, and while it doesn't stop *The Division* being a great cover shooter, it does create plodding lulls between story missions.

When side activities don't involve shooting, they're just boring. Missing person requests send you looking for ECHOs – 3D holograms of a scene from the past, like a car accident or murder. But sleuthing involves little more than activating the ECHO, listening to some chat, and closing the case. Worse are the 130 collectable phone messages, which should win some sort of award for most inane audio logs ever found in a game. You'll never struggle to enlist allies for the story, but good luck gathering three friends for an evening of scouring virtual Manhattan for dropped phones.

So what reason is there to keep playing once the core story is wrapped up? Mainly, missions can be repeated on higher difficulties, though this is less about XP, more for superior loot. Clothes are bland, the armor's fine, but the game is all about the guns. Even a slight upgrade feels game-changing, a few extra damage points in the chamber instantly noticeable in your next firefight. Rifles are our favorite, dealing thousands of points



ABOVE The city goes to pieces when terrorists target the Black Friday sales.

LEFT Skills let you tailor new classes around healing, assault and tech (think support items).

if the hit is just perfect, tailor-made for cover-based play. But the machine guns best show off the benefits of RPG combat progression in a shooter, particularly when you're rapid-firing the kind of numbers you'd have been lucky to squeeze out of a shotgun a few levels earlier. But as great as the constant trade up feels, it won't be long before the pursuit of greater gear tempts you to the Dark Zone.

The Dark Half

Divided from the rest of New York, these walled off streets are ruled by tougher AI enemies, who also drop far beefier rewards. Your Dark Zone level is completely independent of your level in the main game, and is raised through kills alone (and far faster than in the main game). High level Dark Zone players are able to survive deadlier parts of the lawless streets, and can also trade with the snobbish vendors. The rewards have never been higher, but don't go alone. Enter the Dark Zone with a team that you trust to have your back, because here you can openly murder other players.

Naturally, this has consequences. Attack another agent unprovoked and you'll be marked as a rogue for a short amount of time, a window that increases if you kill multiple agents. Slaughtering a rogue player carries no negative consequences and potentially big rewards, so taking the first shot makes you a marked man to every nearby player. Having to risk your reputation stops this PvP area descending into an unplayable bulletstorm. Instead, you're constantly

RIGHT "Oh man, nothing makes me happier than staring intently at this tire. Maybe I should seek help."



WINTER WONDER BLAND

Don't expect *The Division* to be reviewed in *Vogue* anytime soon, with its gray windbreakers and office-appropriate jeans. Ubisoft help liven things up a bit by letting you wear cosmetic clothes over your stat-filled armor, should you wish to murder people while dressed as a trendy Brooklyn barista.

flanked by potential threats: cordial, expressionless avatars that could snap at any moment. It's the Mexican standoff at the end of *Reservoir Dogs* on an endless loop, and brilliant fun.

As in real life, murder is risky but rewarding [*Huh? - Ed.*]. Kill another agent and you can snatch their loot, but getting it out isn't as simple as hightailing it for the nearest exit. You have to find an extraction point, send up a flare, then wait the longest 90 seconds of your virtual life for a helicopter. AI enemies and opportunists then rush across the city, both for a chance of extracting their own loot and to slaughter you for yours. Any illusion of camaraderie shatters as that chopper nears; we'll be damned if anyone's taking our gun.

The Dark Zone ties PvP action into the wider fiction beautifully. Combined with the more traditional story action,

it's easy to see *The Division* getting its claws into those who bounced off the similar offering in *Destiny*. We're less convinced that it has the compelling spread of loot needed to pull people into a hundred-hour habit (real-world hardware can't compete with Bungie's space guns), but as long as you can stomach the grind, and are open to co-op play, this offers a solid 30 hours of smart, tactical shooting. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

A generous, rewarding shooter with some of the best multiplayer gunplay on Xbox.

8

PUBLISHER UBISOFT / DEVELOPER NADEO / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$39.99

Trackmania Turbo

UBISOFT PRESENT THE RIDE OF YOUR STRIFE **CHRIS SCHILLING**

"Good news! You've unlocked some new tracks." At a time when developers like to offer congratulations

for the paltriest of achievements, *Trackmania Turbo's* cheery message feels more meaningful than most. It is, after all, hardly a given. Yes, this is one of *those* games – the kind of arcade challenge that has you gripping the pad tighter during each attempt, knuckles whitening, palms steadily growing clammy. Then you triumph, and the cruel process begins afresh.

Younger readers: think of it as a 3D *Trials HD* with cars. Oldies: imagine Geoff Crammond's *Stunt Car Racer* with live leaderboards. These synchronize your data with that of all other racers to let you know exactly where you currently stand. Think you're some kind of big shot with your silver medal? Pah. You're only the 229th best player in the US. Or look at it another way: there are thousands of people worse than you. In your face, losers!

Still, to achieve such lofty heights you'll need to put in serious hours. The solo campaign alone has 200 stages, split into five leagues, from the relatively easy White Series to the granite-tough Black. The vast majority of drivers won't even unlock the latter stages: 160 gold medals are required just to access them, and golds are as rare as rocking horse poop. Put it this way: by the end of the second series of levels we were

RIGHT Handling varies across track types. The valley's twitchy car takes some getting used to.

BELOW We can't wait to see the horrors that the community will build for us.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

Snack-sized racing challenges against the clock – and the rest of the world.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Fun, compulsive, generous... and occasionally annoying, but you'll forgive it.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone seeking a change from all those dry, serious sim racers.



"It's a game that rarely has you racing in a straight line for long"

struggling to earn all the silver medals we needed to unlock the third. It is not a polite Sunday afternoon drive.

Here we go again

Happily, the frustration of repeated retries is alleviated by instantaneous restarts. Pass through a checkpoint, meanwhile, and you can jab Y to return to it, albeit without resetting the timer. It's best reserved for a crash immediately after you pass through one, or those occasions when a huge jump sends you hurtling across the sky and you haven't a hope in hell of a successful landing. Leaps and spins are par for the course in a game that rarely has you racing in a straight line for long. Some courses ask you to pull a U-turn from the start. Others invite you to drift around chicanes, and fly through suspended doughnuts.

For the most part, it offers a stern but fair challenge, but that's not always the case. Brush lightly against a trackside object and you're as likely to flip over as to come to an immediate, grinding halt. Other

obstacles are purposely placed in the center of tracks, and while the circuits are handsome, they're occasionally a little too busy to decipher. It says much that you often have to rely on arrows and text warnings to see where you're supposed to be going next. Radio chatter, too, is an unnecessary irritant when you're trying to focus. Who are you telling to go easy on the paintwork? You're talking to the 208th best player in the US here.

It's hard to stay mad at *Trackmania Turbo* for long. You can create and share your own challenges with the help of an intuitive track builder, while multiplayer offers hot seat and split-screen play across all stages, and even a random track generator to theoretically offer infinite replayability. Alone or with friends, this is a bright and moreish arcade racer – and you know you can trust the 192nd best player in the US on that score. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

Not quite *Trials*, but this challenging arcade racer has something for just about everyone.

8

PUBLISHER EPIC GAMES / DEVELOPER CHAIR ENTERTAINMENT, HARDSUIT LABS / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$14.99

Shadow Complex Remastered

CHAIR'S LIVE ARCADE HIT DESERVES A SECOND CHANCE TO SHINE CHRIS SCHILLING

If *Shadow Complex* was released for the first time today, it would almost certainly be misunderstood.

In the current climate, it sounds for all the world like an indie game about emotions, starring a man with an irrational fear of the mysterious silhouette that seems to follow him around everywhere whenever the sun comes out. Not so – this is a classic action adventure, with gear-gated exploration and plenty of shooting. It's old-fashioned but exquisitely fashioned; and six years on it holds up rather well.

It begins by pulling that familiar genre trick of giving you a brief glimpse of the powers you'll gradually accrue over the course of the game, handing you fleeting control of a bald, gruff marine who's killed off pretty quickly. Instead, we're in the shoes of Jason Flemming – a roguishly charming man with short brown hair voiced by Nolan North, before roguishly charming men with short brown hair voiced by Nolan North became clichés. Carelessly losing new girlfriend Claire to a suspiciously well-funded anti-establishment organisation, he heroically descends into their warren of a base to rescue her. Good-natured violence, and the odd wisecrack, inevitably ensues.

The magic torch

There are elements of *Shadow Complex* that haven't aged particularly gracefully. After establishing the concept of gating and the importance of backtracking in a single line of dialog ("I wonder what's up there? I should come back here later," says Flemming, looking quizzically at a vent) it's disappointing that Chair loses confidence in their players, subsequently slapping a shopping list of items that you missed from the first area on screen. And the pulpy story is a bit shoddy, with its honkingly conspicuous exposition and on-the-nose dialogue. The arbitrary limit on your flashlight's

RIGHT Although play is locked to a 2D plane, a slick camera shifts around to frame the action more dynamically.



short cut

WHAT IS IT?

What the kids these days call a 'Metroidvania': explore, shoot and upgrade.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Easygoing action, with tight controls and immaculate pacing of unlocks.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone! Assuming you're not allergic to generic heroes and dull plotting.

"You rarely go more than half an hour without getting a new toy"

battery is strange, too – its beam is smartly used to color-code obstacles, allowing you to instantly locate routes that are otherwise hidden from view when it's dimmed. But having to flick it on every now and again when it runs out of juice becomes an unnecessary irritant.

We've seen better remasters – you get crisper textures and brighter lighting, and that's about it – but *Shadow Complex* remains an enormously entertaining game with a terrific sense of pacing. You rarely go more than half an hour without getting your hands on a new toy. Grappling hooks and missiles make way for more playful gadgets like a foam gun that temporarily clogs up enemies, or an anti-friction device that allows you to destroy obstacles by running into them at high speed.

It's a good deal funnier than we remember, too, with a strong slapstick element to combat. You can shoot a spider-bot to drop it near the feet of an unsuspecting soldier, who'll cower as its gas tank hisses and scream as

it explodes. Drop a grenade in a pipe in the foreground and a burst of flame at the other end will burn a patrolling guard at the back. And there's a wonderful moment when a group of suited up enemies casually discuss their organisation's masterplan over lunch while you scuttle around unseen in the vents above.

Within a brisk six hours, you'll have drowned a spider-tank, frozen the legs of a large mech in expanding foam to rip out its shield circuits, and fired rockets to bring down an airship. And by the time you've done all that you'll probably be keen to hunt down the rest of the upgrades, or perhaps to take on the optional challenge rooms. Returning to *Shadow Complex* is like slipping on a pair of snugly old slippers; the only downside is you'll end up cursing Chair's iOS successes that mean a sequel is very unlikely. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

Fresh paint for this XBLA favorite is sufficient excuse to enjoy it all over again.

8



PUBLISHER EA / DEVELOPER EA CANADA / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$59.99

EA Sports UFC 2

WHO'S GONNA KNOCK YOU OUT? CONOR SAID KNOCK YOU OUT **MARTIN KITTS**

074

In this most chaotic of sports they say that styles make fights. A great striker might look invincible against half a dozen

of his own ilk, but as soon as he faces, say, a southpaw jiu jitsu expert or an iron-chinned wrestler, his mortality can be painfully and bloodily exposed. And rather than embark on a new era of dominance, his conqueror is more than likely to get humbled one or two fights down the road.

It's some measure of consolation for our frustratingly patchy performance in *UFC 2*'s headline Ultimate Team mode. Irish mixed martial artist Conor McGregor recently joined his fellow *UFC 2* cover star Ronda Rousey in surrendering his unbeaten UFC record via resounding beatdown in his last fight. But at least he managed to put on a decent winning streak before finally finding his kryptonite. There

are no supermen in this sport, and certainly none in the roster of putty-faced fighters we have sculpted.

Spamming the jab has been our preferred tactic, which will probably go some way to explain why we've had such modest success. Swinging for the fences consumes such a large chunk of stamina that it only takes a few big misses to leave our guy staggering on wobbly legs, ready to be knocked down. By feeding our opponent a steady diet of stiff left hands, we invariably turn one side of his face into hamburger by the end of the second round.

While blocking over 100 jabs with your face would probably break the resistance (and probably the eye socket) of any man in the real sport, *UFC 2*'s fighters are made of sterner stuff. They might eventually leave themselves open for a finishing haymaker, but they could just as easily respond with a third-round

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

Face-punching mixed with arm-breaking, knee-twisting and neck-throttling.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

WWE with the added frisson of potential horrific injury.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone who thinks Mike Tyson was just a big old softie as a boxer.

knockout after our one-armed attack leaves our journeyman gasping for air.

The idea is that you train your fighter and learn how to be a little less one-dimensional, earning packs of cards to add better stamina and new moves, but it's a long process and the early days can be demoralizing. There's something about seeing your fighter slump to the canvas in a bloody heap that's far more deflating than conceding any number of last-minute goals in a game of FIFA. Especially when you thought you'd been winning up until that point.

Imitation game

Taking charge of the game's roster of real fighters provides a glimpse of where you can eventually end up. They're stronger, more versatile and, in some cases, impressively recognizable via their fighting styles alone. Tapping the buttons to try a few punching combos with Anderson

“Some fighters are impressively recognizable via their fighting styles alone”

RIGHT *UFC 1* only had seven female fighters. Its sequel has 20, as well as the ability to create your own.

FAR LEFT McGregor won the chance to star on the *UFC 2* cover by defeating José Aldo at *UFC 194*.



LEFT Anderson 'The Spider' Silva prints his nickname on his gum guard. Lucky it's not a longer alias - it'd ruin his poor mouth.



Silva sees him launch into the famous reverse elbow he used to knock out Tony Fryklund ten years ago. Throw the feet and you'll see the front kick he unleashed on Vitor Belfort's face.

Jon Jones's oblique kicks to the knee look similarly authentic, although his legendary eye pokes seem to have been omitted. Not everyone has a fighting style or stance that's quite so distinctive, and a lot of the faces look decidedly odd, but from a distance it looks pretty close to the real thing.

Ground and pound

One thing fighters don't seem to do in the game is follow up with multiple shots to an unconscious opponent. It's almost guaranteed that in the real Ultimate Fighting Championship a fighter won't stop punching until the referee forcibly drags him off his lifeless victim. In *UFC 2* there are some weird stoppages where a weak-looking blow removes the last of

MYSTIC MAC'S CORNER

There's an excellent mode that's activated in the run-up to live *UFC* events, whereby you can submit your predictions for the main card and, if you want, try to replicate them in the game. We correctly foresaw that Nate Diaz would sub Conor McGregor. If only we'd put money on it...

a fighter's health, and the victor just stands up and walks away.

The ground game is much more difficult to get into than the standup, featuring stamina-sapping tussles for position before you are able to start a submission mini-game that can end the fight, hopefully in your favor. Various button prompts keep you informed of the state of play and exactly which options are available to you, but responding to all of them will leave your fighter exhausted. Knowing exactly when to make your move is a hard skill to master.

Knockout mode disables merciful takedowns, turning the game into a best-of-three slugfest. There's a health bar for each fighter, which can be chipped away gradually or removed in one go if you land a perfect shot. The regular mode is definitely more fun, though, with the complication of the ground game providing a reason not to be reckless with your strikes.

It's an impressively solid rendition of the sport, then, although the strict adherence to the *UFC* license means that a lot of potential fan service is missing. You won't find any non-*UFC* fighters, you can't change the rules like you could in EA's first MMA game, and everyone wears drab black and white shorts. But if you're a fan who's looking for a way to soak up the atmosphere in the build up to a *UFC* event, this is a great way to pass a few post-midnight hours. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT
And still... the undisputed heavyweight champion of MMA games.



PUBLISHER WARNER BROS / DEVELOPER NETHERREALM STUDIOS / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$59.99

Mortal Kombat XL

BOOT UP XL TO CHOP MEN INTO XS PIECES **ANDI HAMILTON**

2015's impressive *Mortal Kombat X* was a grand entry in the violent-as-hell fighting game series. Nearly a year on, and

with many months of DLC – additional fighters, costumes and, crucially, character balancing tweaks – bolted on, it has been reissued in this extra large package, just in time to compete with the other two big hitters in the fighting game market.

Mortal Kombat X was extremely successful on first release, shifting a remarkable five million copies worldwide – a feat normally reserved for Nintendo's *Smash Bros.* games. It has also nurtured a very healthy competitive scene, with the Electronic Sports League getting mainstream exposure in the United States and offering meaty prize pools. It's fully deserved, too – *Mortal Kombat X* is arguably the high-water mark of the series to date, and it's encouraging to see that NetherRealm Studios are looking to support it into 2016.

Mortal instruments

As part of this package you get the brand new 'Kombat Pack 2', which includes four uniformly excellent characters. Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is a brute who can bully other players, making them scared to push any button other than block. H.R. Giger's Alien makes a terrifying appearance – a perfect foil to last year's inclusion of the Predator. Bo'Rai Cho is a slovenly, farting monk who was first introduced in *Mortal*



RIGHT Triborg's armor and helmet adjust depending on which robot form he is taking on.

BOTTOM As well as being a skilled fighter, Bo'Rai Cho also enjoys farting and vomiting over foes. Sick.

short
cut

WHAT IS IT?

2015's ultraviolent beat 'em up, repackaged with all the DLC and some extra bits.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

A bunch of gods, ninjas and horror icons trying to tear each others' limbs off.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Fans who are looking for all the DLC in one chunk, or a jumping on point for newbies.



“You can uppercut defeated foes off a bridge and onto the spikes below”

Kombat: Deadly Alliance. But the best of the bunch has to be cunning Triborg, a robot which has variations that allow it to take on the forms of three robot characters from previous games in the series: Cyrax, Sektor and Smoke. They're so radically different in their handling that you may as well be playing three separate characters, with Sektor's teleporting, Smoke's mobility and Cyrax's explosives that set opponents up for cruel combos.

Long-time fans of the series will also no doubt be pleased to see the return of The Pit, the classic stage featured in many games throughout the series. Here, you are able to uppercut your defeated foes off the bridge and onto the sharp spikes below – now with an extra-grim limb-tearing twist on the journey down.

One of the biggest improvements made is to the netcode. *MKX* relied on some simulated latency, which meant that certain things, such as fireballs, were almost impossible to react to when playing online. This resulted in some tactics and moves being viable

online but useless offline, and vice versa, essentially making online *MKX* a different game to real-life multiplayer. *Mortal Kombat XL* employs 'rollback' netcode, which is the current standard when it comes to fighting games. This allows for online play that more closely resembles the local experience. It is a significant improvement and eliminates the cheap online 'strategies' that have plagued ranked matches since its release. It might not be the most exciting thing *MKXL* brings to the table, but is absolutely essential to the game's continued success over the coming year.

Mortal Kombat XL is an enjoyable, generous package which freshens up one of the best fighters on the market for the next year or so. Whether the next move is a 'Kombat Pack 3' or a whole new game, *Mortal Kombat XL* ensures that NetherRealm Studios have our attention. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

A cracking collection of new content for a fine fighting game. **Kommandable!**

8

downloads



THE LATEST AND GREATEST DLC AND UPDATES CHEWED UP AND DIGESTED FOR YOU MATTHEW CASTLE

GTA ONLINE – RHINO HUNT



PRICE FREE

This Adversary Mode update tasks hunters in buggies with

dropping the most dangerous of beasts – no, not a chemically-enhanced Trevor, but a Rhino tank – using nothing but sticky bombs. In the flat plains of Fort Zancudo and Los Santos International Airport, the odds can feel stacked against the hunters as they must strike hard and fast before they're picked off by the artillery. However, the Redwood Lights Track is where this mode excels as the uneven terrain and various buildings turn encounters into a tense game of cat and mouse, meaning even one on one confrontations are not a foregone victory for the big gunner.

ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST: DEFINITIVE EDITION



PRICE \$19.99 OR \$4.99 UPGRADE TO ORIGINAL

Ori's problem? It didn't have any: it was a perfectly

paced and structured Metroid-like. This 'definitive' upgrade recognizes the fact with lots of tweaks to the edges of the action; things like trickier difficulty modes and fast travel. Even the two new locations are over apologetically quickly, serving more as tutorials for new powers geared towards *Ori's* speedrunning crowd. Dash is an obvious boon, but it's light grenades that up the high-skill game; using your own projectiles as grappling points opens many shortcuts. It's a must-play for newcomers, but only dedicated fans need to upgrade.

JUST CAUSE 3 – SKY FORTRESS



PRICE \$11.99 OR \$24.99 WITH THE SEASON PASS

The first chunk of *Just Cause 3's* Air Land & Sea Expansion

deals with the air bit: Rico gets a 'Bavarium-powered wingsuit' (read: cool jetpack) and takes to the skies to fight airborne drones. The adage 'more of the same' applies here, but when one of our key gripes about the parent game was a feeling of repetitiveness, things don't bode well. It's hardly helped by the fact the titular fortress is hardly the size of a single province, and simply not as pretty a playground.

Luckily, the jetpack can be carried over to the main game, but it often feels like a clunkier alternative to the wingsuit/zipline/parachute combo, resulting in an add-on pack that feels decidedly slight.

LEGO DIMENSIONS – MIDWAY ARCADE



PRICE \$24.99

Never one to do things by halves, *Dimensions'* final DLC offers nothing less

than a working retro arcade. Steering the included *Defender* cabinet into in-game sockets boots up emulated games of *Super Sprint*, *Gauntlet* and *Joust* and other pocket money gobblers. It's like a mini *Rare Replay*, with 22 cabinets dotted across the DLC level and campaign.

Arcade themed worlds are as formulaic as the rest of the game, but no crumbling oldster will be able to resist the chance to tear up the street from *Paperboy* in *Spy Hunter's* Interceptor. It's steep at \$24.99, but hey, that's the arcade racket for you.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE – THE LAST MAHARAJA



PRICE \$6.99 OR \$29.99 WITH THE SEASON PASS

The final piece of season pass content for Jacob and Evie's

Victorian adventures, this three hour dose of 10 missions takes place in the main map of London, making it ideal if you've taken to pottering around not knowing what the Dickens to do next. While lacking the brutal excitement of the *Jack The Ripper* DLC, it remains a nice stack of variations on the theme of stab, sneak and drive that made *Syndicate* so appealing. Plus, as part of your quest to take on the Templars and protect Maharaja-to-be, Duleep Singh, there's an enjoyably beer-drenched mission where you play as a rather rat-assed Jacob. Worth it for this slurring assassin alone.

FORZA MOTORSPORT 6 – PORSCHE EXPANSION



PRICE \$19.99

When you're playing a racing game full of real-world cars, you're truly missing

the point if you spend it chugging along the roads in a worn-out rust bucket.

Instead, live the life of someone who makes 5,000 times more than you with this Porsche pack, containing over 20 models, some multiplayer events and a new track to sweeten the deal. *Forza 6's* handling hasn't got any less fantastic, so you're getting the full Porsche experience here, even if a few more tracks would have been nice. Feels pricey, until we remember that buying an actual Porsche would drive us into financial ruin. Suddenly \$19.99 isn't so steep.

→ FOR EVEN MORE DLC AND THE LATEST UPDATES CHECK OUT GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM

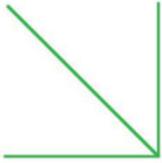


078

extra

Get more from your Xbox





Extra. It's what we all want, isn't it? A few more dollars in your pocket. A fifth slice of cheese on your foot-long sub. Another bullet in the mag. A second longer to smother the target before that bodyguard blunders in. It's the pursuit of this, that delicious 'more', that plays on our writers' minds in our new section. There's the **Long Dark** (p82) survivalist, driven by a thirst for answers in a grim wilderness. The experienced **Hitman** (p92) who seeks increasingly ingenious ways to slay his way to the top. Or the **Dark Souls** (p86) veteran who loves the game precisely *because* it asks for more than any other. A word of warning, though: greed can lead to bad places, too. Pity the poor **Destiny** (p80) addict who, after a thousand hours of happy subservience, asked for more and got it, only to find the illusion shattered. Or learn from the sorry tale of a man driven mad by his lust for **Minecraft blocks** (p90) – the police recently pulled him, gibbering softly, from inside a 100-foot cube replica of the Death Star. Yes, more can be too much. So that's why we've revamped our **Directory** (p96), cutting through swathes of duds to bring you only the finest games, hardware and non-interactive entertainment available on Xbox One. Okay, so it's not quite as tasty as that fifth slice of cheese, but it's close...



080



084



090



092

079

→ CHECK OUT OUR VAST LIBRARY OF XBOX FEATURES AT WWW.GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM



Dull but fascinating, flawed but brilliant; **Destiny: The Taken King** is a beautiful mess of design contradictions **NATHAN BROWN**

PUBLISHER ACTIVISION / DEVELOPER BUNGIE / FORMAT XBOX 360, XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE SEPT 2015

NOW PLAYING

When I went to Bungie shortly before the launch of *The Taken King*, they laughed at me. Not in a bad way, mind – not like they do in the OXM office – I think they were just surprised. They'd asked for my online ID so I could play through *Destiny's* largest ever content update on my own account. They do this for all visiting press, apparently, but had never seen anything like what they found when they did mine: a maxed-out Guardian in every available slot. *The Taken King's* executive producer looked at my login screen before I sat down to play and said something like, "So... been playing some *Destiny*?" Everyone laughed.

I get it. When you write about games for a living, you're so busy playing games for work that you don't have a tremendous amount of time to simply play. Yet by the time *The Taken King* came out, I'd clocked up 700 hours. By Christmas, I was knocking on the door of four figures. A thousand hours in 15 months; I spent about 10 per cent of my entire life, for a year and a quarter, playing *Destiny*. Well, it would be ten per cent of my life if I actually had one, but I'm pretty sure that statistic means that I don't.

Social slaying

And yet *Destiny* is a tremendously social experience. Luke Smith, *The Taken King's* creative director, described *Destiny* as "the bar I can go to when I get home, where I can wear my pajamas and shoot the s*** with my friends," and I think that's perfect. I play with a regular group. There are a dozen of us, mostly strangers at the start but good pals now, precisely because we've spent several hundred hours replaying missions we know off by heart, chatting about life and work and whatever else comes up while we do it. When we need to, we concentrate; when we don't, we shoot the breeze/passing enemies.

The Vault of Glass, Crota's End and King's Fall are perfectly paced for this sort of thing. Boss fights require a firm plan and almost constant communication, but the downtime is designed to make individuals look silly for the entertainment of the rest of the team – floating to their doom in the Vault of Glass' disappearing platform puzzle, perhaps, or being flung across a chasm by a King's Fall piston. Tempers might occasionally fray when an arduous boss fight falls apart at the seams, but minutes later we'll unite in laughter as someone (me) messes up the jumping puzzle or gets lost in the maze again.

So, yes, it's a friendly hangout. But I wouldn't have kept logging in every night if *Destiny* wasn't a brilliant game to actually play. I've never known another shooter like it: it feels fantastic. Its classes and subclasses are all exciting in different ways. And the guns. Dear lord, the guns. This is a game where a sniper rifle headshot can cause the victim, and anyone nearby, to explode. Every high-class weapon in the game is unique, and demands that you change your play style a little to get the best out of it.

I am yet to speak to anyone who doesn't get that about *Destiny*. Those that never took to the game weren't



put off by the feel of its sandbox, or the contents of its toy chest. Instead it was what they saw as the grind to level up and get the best gear. Yet what others saw as a grind I saw as the most delicious carrot (on an admittedly punitive stick). I ran the Vault of Glass for ages before I finally got the amazing Fatebringer hand cannon. It took me nine months to get my hands on the game-breaking rocket launcher Gjallarhorn. I am still, a thousand hours later, missing some of the most coveted weapons in the game – no Vex Mythoclast, no Black Hammer. It was the chance of getting something I was missing that kept me playing late into the night, every night, for over a year.

Gear for war

The Taken King sought to address that specific part of *Destiny*. It's so much more generous, doling out high-level gear as guaranteed rewards for missions and quests. The Light system, which governs your overall strength, was changed from a two-digit number to a three-figure one, flattening out the power curve. Recognizing that some of the weapons available at launch were the best in the game, Bungie pledged to bring more readily available guns up to speed. They brought in a number of quality-of-life changes, and added an item, The Three of Coins, that gave you an increased chance of getting an exotic-class reward – the rarest in the game – when you killed a boss. On paper, it was exactly what *Destiny* needed. In practice, it's what made me stop playing.

Don't get me wrong: I loved *The Taken King*. Bungie's changes were brilliant, the new content was carefully built, and King's Fall was every bit as ingenious as the Vault of Glass' cunning gauntlet. There was nothing wrong with the journey.

WHAT IS IT?

A shared-world shooter that you either love or hate. Whichever camp you fall into, you'll admit it's a bit of a mess.

"What others saw as a grind, I saw as the most delicious carrot (on a punitive stick)"

It's what I found when I got to my destination that sent me packing.

Simply put, my carrot was gone. By making so much good gear available through regular play, and with Three of Coins filling my inventory with more exotics than I could ever use, I didn't feel the need to go hunting for things I was missing. The new raid weapons were, honestly, pretty poor; the guns that drop in King's Fall are okay in King's Fall itself, but not great everywhere else. I had nothing to lust after, really.

If Bungie copied my save file across now, they wouldn't find any max-level characters on my login screen. The three-figure Light stat means that loot drops in the raid are now subject to double random number generating: a dice roll to determine if you get the

gear that you need, then another to decide its Light level. In year one you might have spent months raiding for a pair of boots, but at least when they dropped they'd be at a usable level. Now there are no such guarantees.

There's not really enough to do, either. While *Destiny* now has plenty of content as a whole, Bungie's left too much of it behind, with only *The Taken King's* missions and a handful of old Strikes yielding any year-two gear. Since September all we've had are a few time-limited distractions like Sparrow Racing and two-player co-op mode Crimson Doubles – little diversions that are no substitute for last year's substantial DLC packs.

Destiny's been a fascinating game since day one. Throughout its first year it was light on content and deeply flawed, but endlessly replayable and one of my favorite games of all time. With *The Taken King*, Bungie tried to fix the game's biggest problems, and ended up killing what made it fun. It's a cautionary tale, I think – what everyone says is wrong with a game can sometimes be what actually makes it right.

There's an update coming in April, and I'll be back, but not right away. I'd like to meet whoever decided to launch it on the same day as *Dark Souls III*, so I can laugh in their face. I owe them one, after all. **oxm**

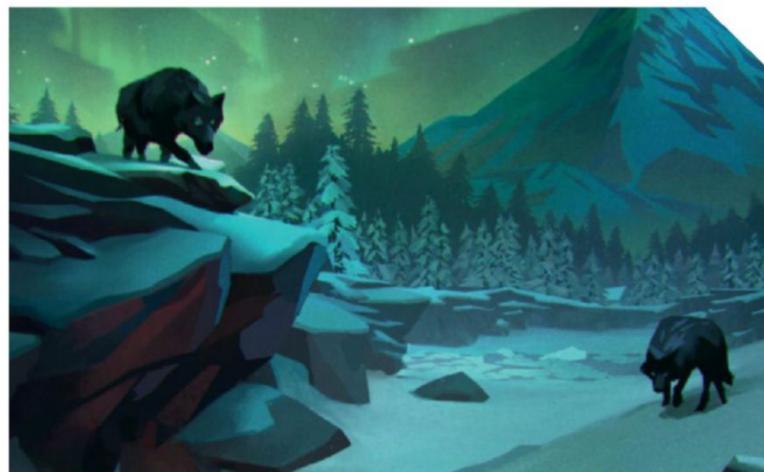
ABOVE Year two weapons may not be as exciting as their exotic predecessors, but the added subclasses certainly are.



THE
LONG
DARK

Exploring **The Long Dark**'s frozen wilderness, and climbing to the top of its highest peak **ANDY KELLY**

PUBLISHER HINTERLAND STUDIO / DEVELOPER HINTERLAND STUDIO / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE 2015



"A light snow begins to fall as I clamber up a rocky cliff and, finally, I'm at the top"

Of course, *The Long Dark* is a survival simulator, and I constantly have to take care of my feeble body as I hike through the snow.

I stop frequently to eat, drink and rest, and as daylight dwindles I find somewhere to sleep.

The hunting rifle makes short work of any wolves who try and attack, and I harvest their meat to keep my energy up. But even if you know the game's systems inside out, a simple mistake can be deadly – and death is permanent.

Slog of ice and fire

I decide to camp in a cave for the night, and inside I find the frozen body of a climber. I can't tell how long he's been dead, but I get the feeling the author of the journal never made it to the top

of the mountain. It's tragic, but I have to dig through his pockets and backpack for supplies. I find a few energy bars and a pair of gloves. Don't judge me: he won't be needing them any more.

The next morning I wake up early, cook breakfast by the fire, then begin the last stage of my ascent. A light snow begins to fall as I clamber up a rocky cliff and, finally, I'm at the top. The shape I saw from the lake was, as I suspected, a crashed plane. Parts of it are scattered everywhere including the landing gear, the wing and the tail section, which I can see is filled with crates. It seems to have been a cargo plane, brought down by the cataclysmic event that plunged the world into this deep, unnatural winter.

The crates are full of useful stuff: clothes, food, water, medical supplies. There's a flare gun too. And I would have missed out on all this if I didn't read that journal back in the cabin. This is what makes exploration in *The Long Dark* so satisfying. Other games would be screaming at you to visit this place, but Hinterland know that finding it yourself is much more rewarding. Waypoints and signposts achieve little but to make games that thrive on exploration feel small and artificial. Littered with secrets waiting to be found organically, it's always worth braving the long dark. **OXM**

There's a cabin by a frozen lake. Inside, I find a journal. The writer, a climber, describes a 'deafening noise' and a 'fire on the mountain' and says he's going to investigate. I decide to follow in his footsteps. At dawn I emerge from the cabin and gaze up at Timberwolf Mountain, the highest in the region, and notice the silhouette of a man-made object resting at its peak.

There are no objectives in *The Long Dark*, and no map telling you where to go. If I hadn't found that journal, I might never have realized there was something up there. It's a game that encourages and rewards exploration, but you have to work for it. Its Canadian wilderness is a brutal place, where death lurks around every corner. If the wolves don't get me, the cold or lack of food will. And *then* the wolves will get me. Either way: the wolves win.

With that in mind, I make sure I have enough supplies for my trip. I bring food, water, matches, firewood, an oil lantern, a bedroll, a hatchet and a hunting rifle. Then I begin my ascent, starting with a hike up the frozen river that feeds the lake. As I trudge through a forest I see something ahead, half-buried in a snowdrift. It's a jet engine. Could the 'fire on the mountain' the climber described have been a plane crash?

To get to the top of Timberwolf Mountain I need to go through a cave network that cuts through it. I carefully make my way through the claustrophobic, winding corridors of rock, lit only by the warm glow of my lantern, until I see sunlight pouring through an opening ahead. I step through it and find myself in a beautiful snow-dusted valley. I continue my hiking trip, occasionally hauling myself up steep cliffs with climbing ropes left behind by some mountaineer – perhaps the same one who wrote the journal.

WHAT IS IT?

An atmospheric, semi-realistic survival simulator set in a post-apocalyptic Canadian wilderness. It's no picnic, then.

NOW PLAYING



Cult classic **Binary Domain** has much to teach Halo, Gears and others when it comes to scripting team camaraderie **ALEX DALE**

PUBLISHER SEGA / DEVELOPER YAKUZA TEAM / FORMAT XBOX 360 / RELEASE DATE FEB 2012

Heh, well, it's a funny story actually. I'd intended to replay something a little more modern to kick off our grand relaunch issue with a bang, and what Xbox One game is bigger, both in stature and in sheer size (70.4GB and counting), than *Halo 5: Guardians*? But the truth is, I couldn't finish the fight. In fact, I barely managed to get as far as cracking through the glass of the Argent Moon before becoming overwhelmed by powerful ennui.

It isn't the action that is found wanting, although *Halo 5's* campaign is one that is fun almost despite itself. Rather, standing in a lift listening to yet another dreary monologue from one of the Chief's faceless supporting cast, it struck me how utterly, depressingly awful the storyline is at character development.

Six (six!) new characters are introduced during the opening two levels of *Halo 5's* campaign and, broadly speaking, we know as much about them at the start as we do when the end credits roll. Oh, we get backstory by the bucketload, with the likes of Linda (or is it Kelly?) spouting exposition whenever lulls in the combat allow. But although we learn *of* them, we never learn anything *about* them. Whenever the plot heats up, Linda and the lads get shunted into the backdrop, and we never get a chance to learn what drives or motivates them, or how they react when there's a gun to their heads.

It's a sad state of affairs really, because if you think back to the original *Halo: Combat Evolved*, every character was clearly defined and larger than life. Bit-players have to be allowed their moment in the sun if we're to care about their fortunes – as an example, Dom Santiago's evolution from jock meathead to tragic hero across the *Gears of War* arc is surprisingly well done. But for



"Blind cave-fish under six meters of Antarctic ice saw Dan and Faye's lip-lock coming"

a world-class example of a shooter that manages to make you *really* care about the fortunes of your squad, look no further than *Binary Domain*.

WHAT IS IT?

Team-based shooter set in a dystopian future where flooded cities and murderous androids reign supreme.

Now, for whatever reason, *Binary Domain* was a commercial flop. Maybe it was the thrilling-like-tax-returns name, or that it wasn't well distributed.

It doesn't matter: hunt it down, because it's one of the most satisfying shooters you'll ever play, with robo-enemies that shatter when shot in a way *even games* wouldn't dare replicate with flesh and blood.

But as good as the gunplay is, it's the people you shoot with, not at, who live longest in the memory. Director Toshihiro Nagoshi, creator of the *Yakuza* series, wanted to create a shooter where your teammates'

personalities took center stage, and in telling the tale of Dan Marshall and his thrown-together Rust Crew, he was hugely successful. *Binary Domain's* is a sillier world than that of Halo or *Gears of War*, and yet it also contains moments of great poignancy. Most impressively, it manages this with a cast that appear to have been selected from a mail order cliché catalogue – such as Big Bo, your 'woo-ha' bestie, and Charles, a sour Brit who immediately has you pegged as a bit of an ass. Yet as our relationship with them develops, we bond with them through action rather than dictation.

Fifty shades of Faye

And then there's Faye. It's no spoiler that she ends up as the love interest. There are blind cave-fish cut off from the rest of the world by six meters of Antarctic ice that saw Dan and Faye's lip-lock coming. But what follows isn't for spoiling, as a revelation rocks your team to its core, and practically *demand*s that rifts develop.

What happens next is up to you. *Binary Domain's* story is largely linear, but the ending – and who survives – hinges on how much your crew trusts you. Trust is a stat that has to be managed across your team, and getting them all to a high trust level is a huge undertaking. Most variables – such as the tactics you bellow during firefights, or responses to conversations during quieter moments – have the effect of raising the trust level of some squad members while decreasing it in others. Trust also bleeds into combat; efficiently cleaning house raises trust across the board, while friendly fire has disastrous results.

In this way, every line of dialogue and every shot fired in *Binary Domain* matters. Not only are your teammates' fates entwined with your actions, but the plot gives you every reason to care. Quite the contrast with *Halo 5's* awkward dialog. As we sit in the lift, listening to Kelly (or is it Linda?) witter on unprompted, The Master Chief has never looked so alone. **OXM**

OXM EXPLORES

"It's a small world!" they say, and thanks to **Assassin's Creed**'s globetrotting murder sprees, the population of that world is only getting smaller **TOM STONE**

PUBLISHER UBISOFT / DEVELOPER UBISOFT / RELEASE DATE 2007-2016



Boston and New York

Assassin's Creed III We prefer exploring its nuclear future these days, but there's still appeal in leaping around growing American cities (including an actually new New York), rubbing shoulders with historical figures and lobbing tea into the harbor. Take that you lousy fish! Oh, and the British.



New York

Assassin's Creed Rogue New York, New York, it's a helluva familiar town! In *Assassin's Creed III* we covered all this ground! The great sailing's back, but location recycling brings it right down! New York, New York, can we go somewhere new now!



New Orleans

Assassin's Creed III Liberation We're not *swamped* with games set in New Orleans, but *Liberation* loses points for being set centuries before the jazz age (although a slit windpipe does make a sax hard to toot). But wading in marshes at sundown is pretty enough to justify our likely future as crocodile food.



London

Assassin's Creed Syndicate Bar a few cockney clichés, we'll begrudgingly admit this is a lovingly rendered recreation of Victorian London. Bonus points for the horrible weather, minus a million for the unrealistic train shipments. Trains running on time? In Britain? Ridiculous.



Havana, Nassau and Kingston

Assassin's Creed IV Black Flag Crystal blue waters and golden sands make this arguably the greatest destination in the series yet. Pirates prove to be the ultimate karaoke companions, our singing crew making for a nautical iPod as we sail past islands full of ocelots just begging to be air assassinated.





Paris

Assassin's Creed Unity Paris' streets are crammed with furious peasants at the peak of the French Revolution, only slightly spoiled by their thick British accents. By the time we'd figured out how to change the language settings, we'd grown used to the French telling us to "pull our head out of our arse".



Italy

Assassin's Creed II Renaissance Italy boasts the canals of Venice, the awe of the Sistine Chapel and a fist fight with the pope. Beating him to a pulp(it) almost certainly inspired Tom McCarthy to make *Spotlight*. Yet the charlatan snubbed *Creed II* in his Oscar speech. For shame.



Russia

Assassin's Creed Chronicles Undoes all of *India*'s good work with a black, white and red color scheme that's presumably aiming for *Sin City*, but looks more like an unfinished coloring book courtesy of the world's most untalented child. About as colorful and fun as a gay pride parade thrown by the Vladimir Putin's government.



Istanbul

Assassin's Creed Revelations The world's fifth most popular tourist destination is the star of one of the series' least popular games. Feeling a little too similar to Rome and Renaissance Italy, Ezio's swansong still has charming views and more sun than pasty team OXM sees in a year.



China

Assassin's Creed Chronicles The legendary Great Wall of China deserved better protectors than the cone-visioned dunces we stabbed through here. A flawed trip, but a striking one, with misty mountain scenery mixing beautifully with the red mist we sliced out of guards.



Rome

Assassin's Creed Brotherhood Rome wasn't built in a day, yet Ezio can dash through its cobbled streets in an afternoon. Lets you scale the Roman Colosseum, though slipping and falling doesn't result in Ezio getting mauled by lions while a cheering crowd watches on. Missed opportunity there.



Jerusalem

Assassin's Creed The Holy Land is held back by the original's tech limitations – put it next to *Black Flag* and it looks like upturned cereal boxes. But it has all the leaping, climbing and irritating beggars you could want. Oh, and the Brotherhood's secret weapon: an abnormal number of benches.



India

Assassin's Creed Chronicles Features a gorgeous watercolor style, temple backdrops that make the 2D side-scroller feel far bigger, and all the luscious color that presumably got sucked out of the original *Assassin's Creed*. Also a useful cautionary tale of India's biggest cause of death – constant elephant chases.



RETROSPECTIVE DARK SOULS

086





How FromSoft took the action-RPG to a new level by putting faith in players

RICHARD STANTON

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO GAMES / DEVELOPER FROMSOFTWARE / FORMAT XBOX 360

The classical epics from which *Dark Souls* takes so much inspiration share a common starting point: *in medias res*, right in the middle of the action. The Trojan War has been going on for years when the *Iliad* kicks off, and so too in *Dark Souls* does the chosen undead, the player character, awaken to a world-in-progress. The first of many differences, of course, is that this legend is your own.

The hazy and often-ambiguous history of the game's world is part of a larger theme, the thrill of exploration. *Dark Souls* is oft-cited as the best game ever made because it combines obvious qualities – great combat, amazing environments and bosses – with hidden but major changes to how an action-RPG works.

One principle is that you are told very little, but the game is full of learning situations. After waking in the Undead Asylum, there are a few tutorial notes scattered around outlining the basic controls, then you're directed into an enclosed space with a gargantuan hammer-wielding demon. You haven't acquired your starting weapon yet.

Hard knock life

Dark Souls' difficulty can be (and often is) overstated by fans and detractors alike, but situations like this are why. Rather than being pancaked, the alert player will spot an open door beside the demon – and bravely run away.

Figuring this out is the first real tutorial: pick your battles. The Undead Asylum preps you for the 'main' world of Lordran with a mini-tour of adventuring techniques. Enemies are emaciated and weak, but can easily gang up and beat you down. Run up stairs without looking and you'll get crushed by a boulder; check the wall it smashed through to find something.

Dark Souls is for cautious and curious alike, for players who want to follow their nose rather than be led down a pretty hallway, and the 3D map of Lordran has no comparison in gaming history. Centered on Firelink Shrine, where you 'start' after the Undead Asylum, Lordran is a seamless and interconnected series of areas with huge verticality – many parts are visible long before you reach them.

Firelink to the past

Firelink Shrine is so honeycombed it feels like there are more than three main routes out, and indeed there will be, but at the start following two of them will almost definitely see you die horribly. Figuring out the 'right' one to take is trial-and-error, which leads to the idea of death itself – in other games, never much more than a number.

The closest comparison is the conceit behind Groundhog Day. When you die (becoming 'hollow') in *Dark Souls* everything else resets, but you remember what happened – and have a chance to retrieve your 'bloodstain' containing previously collected souls and humanity (required to become human again). This touch is ingenious because such an extra chance to regain hard-earned currencies can and does become a massive fear factor. Dying in *Dark Souls* is intended as a learning experience, encouraging players to master the unfamiliar, but it's also sometimes fruitless.

You roll off a bridge by mistake or take too many swings as a boss winds-up. You misjudge a jump and splat, underestimate the deadliness of a torch, or sprint into a dark room without checking. You Died. *Dark Souls* is difficult and expects players to be able to conquer big challenges, and stay focused. But this is not 'difficulty' in the sense of learning complicated inputs, having lightning-fast reflexes, or even being especially brainy.



ABOVE Lautrec's armor features the arms of his goddess, Fina, embracing him.

→ *Dark Souls* is about perseverance, determination, and adaptability. Whether you learn, or repeat the same mistakes. Not for nothing is Lordran dotted with the corpses of those who gave up. This world's weakest enemies are clad in rags and wield sharp sticks, but will gut a cocky hero in an instant. Don't even get me started on the dogs. And as you press further the immortal horde of knights, hollows and demons become more hard-hitting and merciless.

The other side to this equation is, of course, what the chosen undead can do. The player character can equip something in both arms (usually a shield and a weapon), two-hand their weapon for extra-damaging blows, parry enemy attacks and, most important of all, dodge-roll. But the possible equipment enables an enormous number of fighting styles.

The first time I played *Dark Souls* it was at a shuffling pace with shield permanently up, occasionally poking things with a spear. Since then I've played as a ninja-flipper with dual blades, a two-handed halberd master, a parry-based poison assassin, a glass cannon mage, a suicide pyromancer, a half-dragon nudist, a holy prankster that specialised in pushing other players off ledges, and a club-wielding barrel-boy that can go toe-to-toe with most bosses. The point isn't variety for the sake of it, but the range of options players have and can build into.

And so, as the monsters gradually grow in size and aggression, your understanding of the core principles – defending obvious blows, picking a moment to attack – begins to deepen into timed dodges and devastating counterattacks. The most incredible selection of bosses ever devised



flurries and deadly pyromancy. The Iron Giant is huge, hulking, and fought atop a small pillar. The Gaping Dragon tries to eat you, corrodes equipment, and uses its long body to enormously damaging effect. Ceaseless Discharge (yes, really) is a magma-spewing giant trying to swat a fly. The Great Grey Wolf Sif fights with her dead master's sword clenched in her teeth, and even when wounded struggles to the last.

And this is all early stuff. The focus of *Dark Souls'* first half is reaching Anor Londo, the city of the gods, a vision of Olympus realized in High Gothic architecture and framed by the radiant sun. Here wait Ornstein and Smough, my favorite boss fight ever, a classic thin man/fat man combination that alternately whittle at and smash the player. Smough's gigantic hammer collapses the room's pillars while

“Dark Souls uses a combination of storytelling techniques that are a delight to uncover”

for a game are organised in another progression. Early examples like the Asylum Demon and Taurus Demon seem huge and hit hard, but are relatively slow and clumsy opponents – while the dreaded Capra Demon is barely bigger than you, but fights in a tiny room alongside two dogs.

Every encounter has unique tactical considerations. The Bell Gargoyles crowd and batter foolhardy players. Spider-witch Quelaag's lower body is vulnerable, but her beautiful upper half guards it with flaming sword



ABOVE The genius director Hidetaka Miyazaki made his name with the Souls series.

Ornstein zips back and forth with piercing lance strikes. Get one down, and the other 'absorbs' his fallen companion and becomes a super version. Everything about this fight is climactic, and that's because you're meant to suspect nothing.

This isn't the place to delve into the rabbit-hole of *Dark Souls* lore, other than to say it uses a revolutionary combination of storytelling techniques that are a delight to uncover, and plays on the expectations of its audience. You can play *Dark Souls* entirely straight, do as you're told to do by various characters, and it will meet such expectations. But it's also possible to make your own choices, start piecing facts together, and come to some startling conclusions – as well as discover much more of Lordran.

The hidden areas are, rather wonderfully, both well-hidden and well worth the effort to find. *Dark Souls'* original prototype, a level made as a microcosm before full development began, here becomes The Painted World of Ariamis – which is where the gods hide what is forbidden. It is filled with the misshapen, the rejected, and the re-purposed, packed with secret

silver medallists



FLUNK SOUL BROTHER
DARK SOULS II
Not so much an alternative as a B-team sequel, *Dark Souls II* nevertheless has adherents and neat ideas of its own. Great DLC, too.



CD PROJEKT RED
THE WITCHER 3
The combat is clunky next to the precision of *Dark Souls*, but this is a more mainstream action-RPG with many stories to tell.



LORD HAVE MERCY
LOARDS OF THE FALLEN
Be warned: *LotF* copies almost everything about the Souls games, except what makes them great.

Dark Souls' critical acclaim has led to a rush of imitators and alternatives. Can any of them live up to Miyazaki's masterwork?



LEFT The Iron Golem, "slayer of countless heroes", waits atop Sen's Fortress.

BELOW *Dark Souls* allows players to use magic as well as melee.

cubbyholes and unexpected horrors, the masonry weathered beyond time. Finding this, and it takes some effort, feels like discovering Atlantis.

There are so many other sides to *Dark Souls*. Take its divisive online feature – brilliant precisely because it takes a bit of control away from players to create something new. At almost any time, as long as your character is human rather than hollowed, another online player can 'invade' your world. The invader gets humanity for kills, while the host can either stand and fight or run toward the nearest boss gate for a dishonorable escape.

Kill or be killed

The dynamic this set-up creates is unmatched across other multiplayer modes. It's an instantly personal moment, because the objective of invading another player's world is, plain and simple, to kill them. There are other considerations too: invaders won't be attacked by enemies, but the host still has to worry about them. Invaders can only use humanity items to heal, while hosts can drink from their plentiful Estus flasks. It's not an even playing field, and maximizing the advantages on each side comes down to strategy and style.

Online also gives any player the chance to get help with troublesome areas through 'summons' – other players who offer to help take out particular bosses. There's much more, like the covenants that set players against one another in quirky



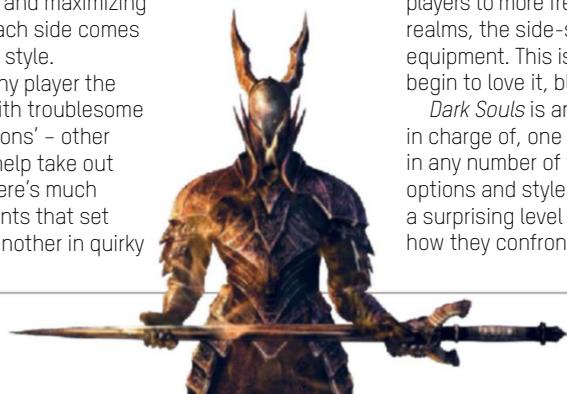
BELOW Gwyn's Silver Knights became the charred Black Knights after facing demons.

manners, the way some players insist on 'dueling' rules ignored by most, or the 'gank squads' that entrap unsuspecting invaders. Or the way *Dark Souls*, on completion, rolls over into NG+ and makes everything a little harder and a lot more rewarding, allowing players to more freely explore the online realms, the side-stories and upgrade equipment. This is a game that, as you begin to love it, blossoms further still.

Dark Souls is an adventure you feel in charge of, one that can be tackled in any number of ways. It's a world of options and styles that allows players a surprising level of expression in how they confront its challenges. It's

for good reason that the community developed a wing dedicated to dress sense and style – Fashion Souls.

But more than anything, *Dark Souls'* emphasis on the player is what pays off. An Achievement is not a 20G popup. An Achievement is mastering a weapon, invading another player successfully or, over hundreds of hours, piecing together an incredible tale. It's dying countless times and coming back to win. *Dark Souls* has respect for players, but expectations too, and over time weaves a history around you. You decide whether that's comic, tragic, heroic or any number of other things – but as a whole it's simply epic. **OXM**



WHY I LOVE... MINECRAFT BLOCKS



Seemingly insignificant at first glance, these 3D wonders combine to create something truly amazing **ALEX WILTSHIRE**

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / **DEVELOPER** 4J STUDIOS / **FORMAT** XBOX 360/XBOX ONE



RIGHT Blocks run the gamut from wood, stone, grass, gold, diamond, water and fire, to pumpkins and zombies.

I've played a lot of *Minecraft* over the years. I first played it way back in 2009 when it was a browser game and you couldn't do much beyond placing and destroying blocks. I've played with my kids, with friends, on my own, and also to research a book I wrote called the *Minecraft Blockopedia*.

The thing that's sustained my interest for so long is *Minecraft*'s depth. With knowledge of the properties of all its blocks, you can build amazing things, like functional word processors and scale representations of Battlestar Galactica, as well as simply survive and make the land around you habitable. In writing the book I came across some fascinating characteristics that helped me appreciate *Minecraft* even more.

First, and it's something that kinda digs a nail under and starts to expose the true nature of *Minecraft*, is the fact that air is a block. It has the block ID of 0, despite being nothing. You can't pick it up, not even with the Silk Touch enchantment. But *Minecraft* is a world made in a computer, and computers don't do nothing very well, so they have to count the absence of things as a thing, if you get what I mean. So air has a value.

Effectively, you create air by destroying blocks and destroy air by placing blocks. But while air would appear to have no purpose, it does actually play a role in the game, due to the fact both you and mobs (any living creature) can suffocate. Essentially, for the time the top half of a body is inside any solid block, it receives damage. Being engulfed in falling sand or gravel is a common cause, but you can also be suffocated by riding a minecart or pig into a single block gap.

Oddly, you can't be suffocated by transparent blocks. This is because *Minecraft* doesn't look at blocks in terms of solidity, and instead uses transparency as an indicator of block type. This property extends across all sorts of strange rules. For instance, mobs can't spawn on transparent blocks. But you can't place signs or torches on transparent blocks either.

Something that's very handy about non-solid transparent blocks, such as signs, torches and iron bars, is the fact that they create air pockets in water. This property is a good way of avoiding drowning – just put a sign down on a sea bed and another on top of that and you've got a two-block area you can go to catch your breath. Remember this: it could be a lifesaver.

Life's a beach

Soul sand is another of my favorites. I don't only like it because it looks like it's made from screaming faces. I like it because it's functionally weird, too. Anything walking on it is severely slowed, including you, because you sink into it a little. But weirder is the fact that if you put a layer of ice underneath a bed of soul sand, anything on it moves even slower. You used to be able to use the sinking property to make one-way

before exporting the save back to the USB drive. But while the command block will be placeable, it sadly doesn't work. In defense of this decision, command blocks aren't exactly intrinsic to the PC version. They're only available from the command line and they're super hard to use. They're essentially a programming interface and involve typing lines of code. Still, it would be fantastic to be able to play command block-powered worlds on Xbox One or Xbox 360. Here's hoping.

Minecraft's history is one of players feeling out how to do everything, from making a pickaxe in the early days to summoning the Wither. When it was first released there was no tutorial; nothing to tell you how to survive or even why you should want to. Everything that's known about *Minecraft* today is the result of what players have discovered for themselves and shared with others.

“Everything known about the game is the result of what players have discovered for themselves”

doors, by placing soul sand in front of a two-block-high doorway. The small hop up from the slight dip sees you collide with the door frame and you're blocked from moving through it. Mojang patched this out – fair enough; it was probably a bug and it made no sense – but I think not making sense is the whole point of soul sand. Ah, well.

Command blocks are the subject of a lot of confusion, frustration and hope. They're incredibly powerful, giving you the ability to change the rules of the world, give players items, modify mob behavior and more. As such, they're great for building worlds with stories or complex game designs – but they're not in the Xbox versions of the game. Not quite, anyway. You can see one, if you hack a world by saving it to a USB drive, import it into Windows using Horizon, and use the oPryzeLP MC360 mod tool to add the command block to your inventory

One of the most interesting challenges is to collect a dragon egg. To get one you need to kill the Ender Dragon, and that means reaching The End, which is a huge challenge in itself. Once the dragon's dead, a portal opens back to the Overworld, and on top of that appears – for the first time you kill the dragon in a world only – a dragon's egg. But you can't pick it up. If you do, it teleports somewhere else in the area. And if you make it fall, it'll smash, *unless* you make it fall on to one of those non-solid blocks I mentioned earlier, like a sign or torch. The skill, dedication, knowledge and equipment to get to and kill the dragon, and then to grab its egg... The fact it's useless just adds to the fact that for me, the dragon egg epitomizes what it takes to be a truly great *Minecraft* player.

In the next issue, we celebrate the real hero of the Mass Effect trilogy

BELOW Steve is basically the god of blocks, destroying and creating as the mood takes him.



→ WHAT GAMES DO YOU LOVE? SEND YOUR LUSTY THOUGHTS TO OXM@FUTURENET.COM



17

AGENT
47'S
GREATEST
HITS

Revisiting the most memorable assassinations from the last 16 years of **Hitman**... MARTIN KITTS

PUBLISHER EIDOS/SQUARE ENIX / DEVELOPER IO INTERACTIVE / RELEASE 2000-2016

01

FRITZ FUCHS

In *Hitman: Contracts* Frantz Fuchs is one of Agent 47's five clonefathers – the men who supplied portions of DNA to splice into the ultimate assassin – and therefore ranks extremely highly on 47's 'people to murder' list. Fritz Fuchs is Frantz's terrorist brother (do try to keep up), and not involved in the cloning business at all, but if you're related to somebody Agent 47 has a beef with, you'd better watch your back. Actually, there's no point watching your back. It makes absolutely no difference. Agent 47 will be there any time he pleases, so you might as well just chill out in an expensive hotel spa and enjoy yourself until our man decides play time is over.



02

SANCHEZ

Agent 47's lucha libre fight to the death with an eight-foot-tall mutant Mexican wrestler was *Absolution's* shark-jumping moment. More than 420 pounds of lumpen muscle, and growing every day, Sanchez wouldn't have looked out of place as a mid-level boss in *Resi 4*, which perhaps makes it appropriate that you fight him via the time-honored system of a quick time event. Following button prompts to block and counter Sanchez's haymakers, you could be forgiven for shedding a tear in memory of Hitman's previous free-form assassinations. The gameplay might have been compromised, but how about those camera angles? Wow!

03

ARMY OF 48

Hitman plots often revolve around the theme of human cloning and Agent 47's various efforts to murder the people who created him. In the very first game of the series, *Codename 47*, he escapes from the laboratory of cackling mad scientist Dr Ort-Meyer and finds work as a paid assassin while he accumulates the cash and skill he needs in order to bring lethal justice to his old man. However, it seems that the Doc hasn't just been sitting idle in his fortified lair, waiting for the prodigal son to return. Instead, he has been busy creating an entire army of 48s – a more obedient version of 47 – to bar the route to his inner sanctum. It's minigun time!



04

ANGELINA MASON

Professional killer Angelina Mason passes the time by talking smutty with her husband while she waits for the go-ahead to kill a politician. This would be fine – it's a private conversation between consenting adults, dressed as giant birds – were it not for the fact that she does it over an open radio channel which Agent 47 is also monitoring and can't be turned off. After you've heard comments like 'this dirty bird is flying south tonight' for about the tenth time while scouting *Blood Money's* bustling Mardi Gras level, it becomes personal. And what better way to shut her up than to drop a grand piano directly on her head, Wile E Coyote style?



05

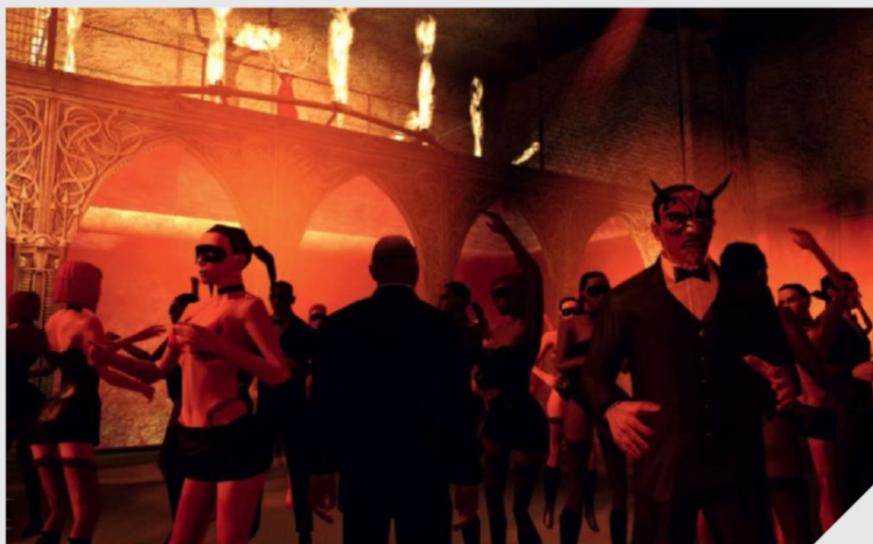
DIANA BURNWOOD

As the realization dawned on us that *Absolution* was going to be more of a stealth/cover shooter than a traditional Hitman game, the very first assassination set the tone for everything that was to follow. You find Diana naked and defenseless in the shower. She's Agent 47's long-time handler, the voice behind the scenes in every previous game and the only person he ever trusted. Despite their history together, despite Diana having saved 47's life and set up the brilliant vengeance climax in *Blood Money*, 47 obeys his sinister new masters and shoots her in the gut. What's worse, he does it in a *cutscene*. Classy.

06

ALISTAIR BELDINGFORD

The sprawling Beldingford Manor is the kind of level *Hitman: Contracts* fans could get lost in for days. Patrolled by guard dogs and shotgun-toting guards wearing pullovers with elbow patches, it even comes with its very own hedge maze, and it's fairly typical of the dauntingly huge locations that characterized the series before the design got tightened up somewhat in *Blood Money*. The Beldingford family owns stables for imprisoning hostages, and the house itself boasts two-way mirrors for perverting at the maids while they're in the shower. Sadly for Alistair, no amount of glory holes can save him from the new bald butler's poisonous whiskey. Chin chin!

**07 VAANA KETLYN**

Arguably the greatest level in Hitman history, this *Blood Money* standout features not one but two costume parties to attend. Heaven is on the top floor of a skyscraper, where guests dressed in white gawp at angelic dancers, while the basement houses Hell, which is Vaana Ketlyn's venue of choice. Every now and then she steps onto a balcony to orchestrate a pyrotechnics show, which is one of several ways to ensure her demise. One tweak of a gas valve and she's toast, but the best part is that the balcony is suspended over a huge fish tank inhabited by a great white shark who likes his food crispy.

08

THE MEAT KING

One of your tasks in this slaughterhouse level from *Hitman: Contracts* is to rescue a kidnapped girl. Unfortunately, by the time Agent 47 reaches her there's not a lot left of the girl to save, as she's been thoroughly butchered by an obese Scotsman who is one of the most repulsive characters in Hitman history. He has parts of her strung up from hooks in a torture chamber that's been festooned with Little Tree air fresheners. After giving him a taste of his own medicine, Agent 47's next target is the opium-smoking lawyer who recently got the Meat King freed from police custody on a technicality. See, 47 does have a heart, of sorts.

**09 VICTOR & DAHLIA**

The Paris episode of this month's *Hitman* asks you to assassinate a power couple: he, a Russian oligarch lording it over his guests at a bustling fashion show; her, an ex-supermodel now hosting a black market auction in the rooms above. The two are careful to never meet, cleaving the fashion house into two contained levels. At least, that's how it appears. Steal a remote firework detonator and you can draw both targets to the back garden with the display – he watches from the patio, she observes from her balcony up top. Sneak behind her, and one good shove later she'll hurtle to her death, crushing Victor in the process.

10

HAYAMOTO JR

This is the quintessential *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* murder. Agent 47's target here is actually big-time arms dealer Hayamoto Sr, but his location has been a closely guarded secret for many years. To flush him out, Agent 47 instead goes after his son – but not to interrogate him or trace his phone calls back home or anything like that. No, 47 intends to whack Hayamoto Jr and plant a tracking device inside the corpse, which he'll be able to follow all the way to the grieving father's hideout. The preferred method for taking him out is inexpertly prepared fugu fish, which makes lethal sashimi if you cut it the wrong way. Bon appetite, junior.



11

CAYNE

A former director of the FBI and all-round shady Illuminati type, Cayne spent years obsessed with capturing Agent 47 in order to sample his DNA and improve his own super-soldier cloning program. At the end of *Blood Money* he finally gets his man, apparently dead and about to be cremated, but 47 pulls off a surprise funeral comeback, rising from his coffin like a bullet-spitting Lazarus and laying waste to all witnesses, the vicar included. Cayne trundles away in his wheelchair but there's no escape. Agent 47 even has time to visit a tool shed and select a garden implement with which to ram home his point. You get why his DNA is in high demand.



12

AGENT 17

One of Dr Ort-Meyer's first successful cloning experiments, Agent 17 is a shadowy presence sent to kill Agent 47 toward the end of *Silent Assassin*. He crops up as a guard with a cult leader, making a nuisance of himself by covering no-go areas with his deadly accurate sniper rifle, and although he can't save his boss from Agent 47's garrote, he escapes and lives to fight in another level. Actually, it's just the very next level. Trying to kill 47 isn't the most sensible of career choices for a professional assassin, and it doesn't take long for 47 to track him down and throttle him dead in St Petersburg.

13

ALVARO D'ALVADE

Blood Money is packed with memorable levels, and *Curtains Down* is probably one of the hits that people most associate with the game. It's where the possibilities available to Agent 47 really begin to open up, with many satisfying ways to dispose of opera singer Alvaro D'Alvade and his people-trafficking partner in crime. D'Alvade is busy rehearsing the firing squad scene from *Tosca*, and swapping the blank-firing prop gun for a real one is the most obvious way to off him without having to get your hands dirty. But if you want to make things more personal, you can take the place of the other actor and pull the trigger yourself. Take a bow, maestro.



14

MRS SINISTRA

Blood Money's fantastic A New Life level sees Agent 47 targeting former mafioso Vinnie Sinistra, who's about to turn state's evidence. The incriminating microfilm that Vinnie's former friends would like returned is actually hidden in his wife's necklace. Surrounded by FBI goons, Mrs Sinistra is bored and permanently drunk, so there are ways of getting the necklace without harming her. However, there's also a big bottle of lighter fuel with which to rig the barbecue, causing the unlucky lady to burst into flames and run around shrieking in distress. There's no saving her now. When she's cool enough to handle, that fireproof necklace is all yours.



15 THE SAINTS

Absolution copped some predictable flak from the taste police for its lurid troupe of sexy nun assassins, but theirs actually turned out to be one of the best levels in the game. Their cunning disguises, consisting of nun headdresses and, erm, rubber fetish gear, mean that they blend in with the crowd in places where you might normally find members of religious orders, such as the seedy motel where they turn up to try their luck at killing Agent 47. Carnage ensues, but the best part is when 47 gets to stalk the last ones that he hasn't already blown up through a cornfield while dressed as a scarecrow. Confession time: we love this level.



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THE TEN BEST XBOX ONE GAMES

games

01 METAL GEAR SOLID V

PUBLISHER KONAMI

After the crazy storytelling excess of *MGS IV*, Kojima signs off with the most *game-y* entry in his celebrated stealth-action series yet.

DEFINING MOMENT Scooping a stray puppy from the Afghan sands and nurturing him into a killer.



02 GRAND THEFT AUTO V

PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR

Brutal and beautiful in equal measures, *GTA V* is so rich in size, scope and spectacle it's hard to believe it was originally built for Xbox 360.

DEFINING MOMENT Warping into the skin of Trevor – only to find he's drunk-driving a helicopter.



03 THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO

This brilliantly authentic world of brutal death and primal lust makes efforts from RPG rivals look wooden in comparison.

DEFINING MOMENT Finding out the truth behind Crookback Bog's murky past – and rewriting its future.



04 HALO 5: GUARDIANS

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT

It's Halo back to its brilliant, belligerent best – with dash and hover techniques keeping the King of Deathmatches a step ahead of the online competition.

DEFINING MOMENT Overcoming daunting numerical odds to win the round for your fallen team-mates in Breakout.



05 ALIEN: ISOLATION

PUBLISHER SEGA

In which you're trapped aboard a spaceship with a lethal nemesis. The tension's so thick you can cut through it with a blowtorch.

DEFINING MOMENT Cowering behind a rickety hospital trolley, with *everything* crossed that she doesn't sniff you out.



06 FALLOUT 4

PUBLISHER BETHESDA

An epic, near-endless RPG that throws together thrilling gunplay, a deep crafting system, and a vast retro-futuristic wasteland with the kind of force usually reserved for nuclear fusion.

DEFINING MOMENT Claiming your first Deathclaw scalp.

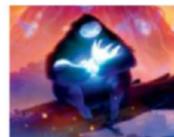


07 ORI & THE BLIND FOREST

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT

Impossibly lavish 2D adventure that soothes your soul with pastel hues and harmonic melodies, before ripping it out with vicious platforming sections.

DEFINING MOMENT Finally nailing the screamingly tough Gonso Tree segment.



08 RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

PUBLISHER UBISOFT

Tense, cerebral shooter that's more fun when nothing's happening than many other online shooters are at the height of their bombastic fireworks.

DEFINING MOMENT Hunkering down next to your hostage as the other team blowtorch through the steel. And then...



09 BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

PUBLISHER WARNER BROS

A technical and cinematic masterpiece that hints at the splendor of new-gen open world games to come.

DEFINING MOMENT Leaping off Wayne Tower and performing a dramatic swoop-over of Gotham's iconic bridges.



10 ROCKET LEAGUE

PUBLISHER PSYONIX

Cars? Playing soccer? That's mad.

Mad, but 100% correct. One of the most original and addictive multiplayer games we've seen in a long, long time.

DEFINING MOMENT Whether it's scored with your bumper or your exhaust, every explosive goal is one to cherish.



→ READ THE FULL XBOX ONE REVIEWS AT GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM

BEST GADGETS FOR XBOX ONE

accessories

01 HALO 5: GUARDIANS MASTER CHIEF CONTROLLER



This UNSC-approved pad can't match the pricier Elite Controller for features and sheer class but with its golden D-pad, it makes up for it by being one of the more beautiful Xbox controllers we've seen.

02 ELGATO GAME CAPTURE HD60



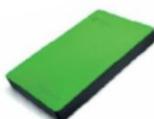
"Xbox, record that. DAMMIT XBOX, I CLEARLY COMMANDED YOU TO RECORD THAT." Save your throat (and prepare to launch your YouTube career) with this excellent capture device. It can record footage retroactively, even if you stupidly forget to press record.

03 TURTLE BEACH EAR FORCE XO SEVEN PRO



This headset's fancy 'Superhuman Hearing' boosts quieter audio cues in games - like the footsteps of foes - to make it easier to find other players in tense online battles. Perfect for getting an advantage in games like *Rainbow Six Siege*.

04 2TB XBOX GAME DRIVE BY SEAGATE



With *Halo 5: Guardians* growing bigger every month (it's the Flood of downloads), 500GB of hard drive space is feeling ever smaller. Quadruple your storage with this 2TB external hard drive. No more deleting your indie collection every time you update.

05 VENOM TWIN DOCKING STATION



Inviting a friend over for local multiplayer can often descend into fist fights for the one controller with any juice in it. Keep your fighting in-game with this docking station, which can charge two controllers at once. You'll save a fortune in batteries, too.

06 CSL STEERING WHEEL P1, CLUBSPORT WHEEL BASE V2 SERVO AND CSR PEDALS



This isn't cheap, but it responds like an actual steering wheel, immersing you in virtual races like no controller ever could. Worth it to experience *Forza 6* at full pelt.

ENTERTAINMENT PICKS FOR APRIL

movies & tv

01 STEVE JOBS



PRICE \$14.99 (MOVIES & TV)
Aaron Sorkin attempts to do for Jobs what he did for Facebook in *The Social Network*, highlighting the frailties of the men behind machines. It's never sure whether to idolize or assassinate its target, but Fassbender still finds magnetism in the megalomaniac.

02 BLACK SAILS SEASON 3



PRICE \$19.99 (MOVIES & TV)
You can tell the third season means business because Toby Stephens has cut off his hair. But if this next chunk is bald, it's not necessarily bolder, as tempers soon cool and characters return to their usual routine of boozing and backstabbing.

03 LONDON SPY



PRICE \$13.99 (MOVIES & TV)
AKA: the one that annoyed the Daily Mail with its romantic male clinches. Noisy fuss is the last thing this is looking for, as Ben Whishaw swaps 0 for a man looking for A after his partner is found dead. Favoring poetic subtlety this is outstanding stuff.

04 BROOKLYN



PRICE \$14.99 (MOVIES & TV)
If your idea of the New York immigrant experience was shaped by Nico Bellic, you'll probably find this young Irish girl's tale a tad soft. But Saoirse Ronan doesn't need a Molotov cocktail to warm your heart; her commanding performance says it all.

05 MISSISSIPPI GRIND



PRICE \$14.99 (MOVIES & TV)
It's a shame it takes dick jokes and a mask to get Ryan Reynolds some box office love, as this tale of pro poker players reminds us how good he is in non-comic mode. Okay, the story deals us a hand of gambling movie clichés, but they're played with style.

06 THE LAST WITCH HUNTER



PRICE \$10.99 (MOVIES & TV)
The problem with effects-driven fantasy films is that they often cross into videogame territory where the same subject is handled with more style and, crucially, interactivity. Why watch Vin Diesel hunt CGI crones when you could be doing it yourself as Bayonetta?

BUBBLING UNDER: RACERS

GETTING FAST AND FURIOUS ON XBOX ONE



FORZA HORIZON 2
Sunstroked Forza spin-off sets the supercars free from the race track to roam around the glorious Mediterranean countryside.



NEED FOR SPEED RIVALS
With Criterion on assignment doing heaven-knows-what, this cops-and-robbers slobberknocker is likely the closest we'll get to a proper Burnout game for a while.



PROJECT CARS
Has some rough edges that even successive patches have failed to smooth, but this is still wheel-to-wheel with *Forza 6* for the title of Xbox One's most realistic racer.



FORZA MOTORSPORT 6
After the undercooked launch game, Turn 10 really brought the goods with wet weather racing and some of the finest visuals on Xbox One. Swoon!

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the disc slot

They make the games we love, but what do they play for fun? We ask developers to pick six from Xbox history. This month: **Phil Spencer**

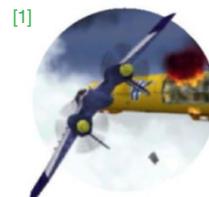


Phil Spencer

Head of Xbox

Years of watching Phil Spencer unveil games at E3 and Gamescom has created a Pavlovian response – we see him, and start composing news headlines in our heads. Here he looks to the past instead.

Crimson Skies [1] is a game from the original Xbox I think had a unique storytelling style, kind of alternate future, that I miss. I miss Jordan Weisman's ability to tell a story in that kind of space. To pick another Jordan game, I would say **Mech Assault** [2]. It was nice in terms of modes and customization, and multiplayer is rich and that's something we can really learn from. I will take **Gears of War 1** [3], because when I saw *Gears* in HD for the first time, it really struck me that we were really moving the console generation from standard def to high def, and I remember my jaw hitting the floor when I saw that game. I'll pick **Phantom Dust** [4], because I think the mechanic around *Phantom Dust* was ahead of its time. We've obviously announced we'd like to do something with *Phantom Dust*, but there was definitely something special with that... I'm going to take **Ori and the Blind Forest** [5] from this generation, because I think *Ori* does a very nice job with bringing gameplay from old, but from an audio, visual and framerate standpoint, feeling like it's a perfect current generation game. And **Steel Battalion** [6], because it was \$200 to buy the whole thing – that was one of those wacky times. I don't think it was the greatest game, but I remember the first time I saw it I thought it was remarkable for how over-the-top it was.



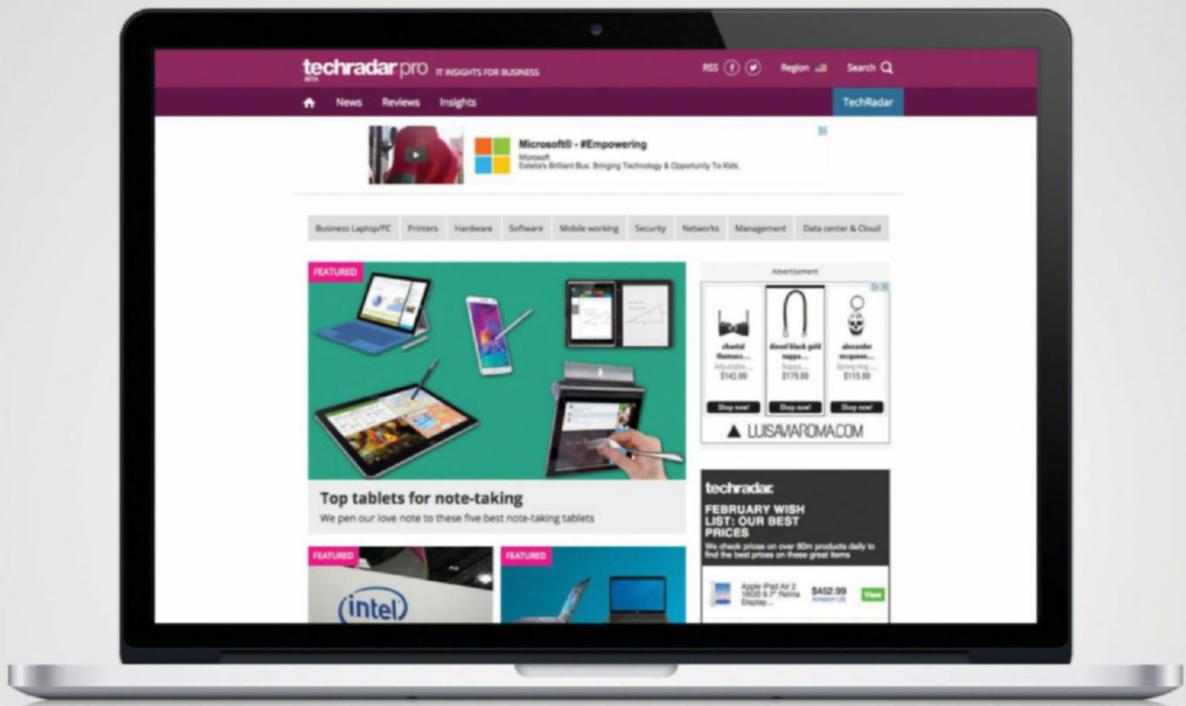
[6]



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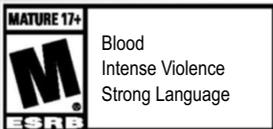


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