

STEAMGIFTS COMMUNITY'S
DIGITAL GAMING MAGAZINE

SGM

ALIEN
RAGE

CHANCE
TO WIN!

DETROIT

B E C O M E H U M A N

NEWS

Fresh News from the
Gaming World

REVIEWS

Armello
The Last Campfire
Outer Wilds
Devil May Cry 5
Mortal Shell
Röki
and more!

EXTRA

Screenshot of the Month
Game Dev Interview
Upcoming Games
Hot On-Sales

ISSUE #7

CONTENTS

SPECIAL SECTION

02) New Sections Added!

NEWS SECTION

03) Gaming Related News

INTERVIEW

09) Blazing Stick Studios

GAME GIVEAWAY

15) Alien Rage - Unlimited

REVIEWS

13) Cyber Hook

16) STAR WARS™ - The Force Unleashed™

19) I Am Fish

28) Celeste

31) American Truck Simulator

35) Armello

38) The Last Campfire

44) Styx: Master of Shadows

49) Röki

52) Rollerdrone

56) Cultist Simulator

59) Devil May Cry 5

69) CHRONO TRIGGER

72) Detroit: Become Human

78) Mortal Shell

83) Outer Wilds

FREE2PLAY SECTION

88) How Fish is Made

HYPE SECTION

93) Upcoming Releases

MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT

89) Movie Recommendation

90) SGM's Playlist

SCREENSHOT OF THE MONTH

91) And the Winner is...

92) Honorable Mentions

HOT SALES SECTION

94) Great Discounts for Great Titles

CREDITS

96) Thank you

REVIEWERS



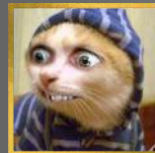
RayOfLight



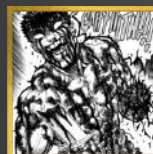
MyrXIII



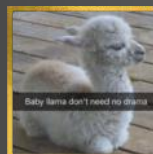
Celtic7Guardian



MrPerry



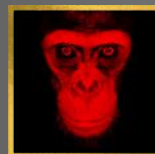
quijote3000



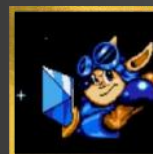
BAEuro



arilla



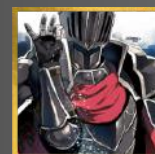
PsychoApeMan



fernadopa



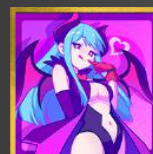
SirPacketLossalot



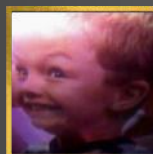
BabyOilonICE



juhaszandor

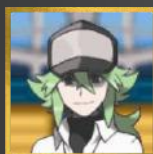


kiioichi



sweetcuppincakes

EDITORS



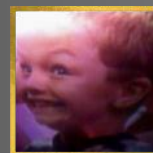
Celtic7Guardian



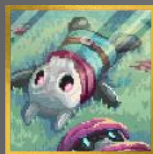
VinroyIsViral



RayOfLight

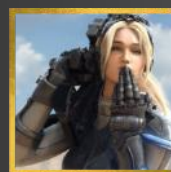


sweetcuppincakes

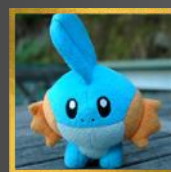


Orbs

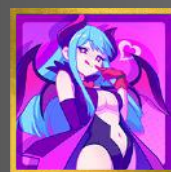
GRAPHIC DESIGNERS



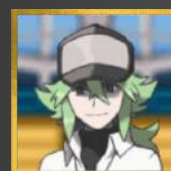
AtomicBlonde



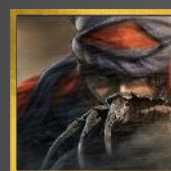
Muddy



kiioichi



Celtic7Guardian



La Volpe

NEW SECTIONS ADDED!

Hello guys and gals,

We are thrilled to introduce our latest magazine sections: the dynamic duo of "Interview" and "Spotlight Review/Preview." These two interconnected sections are dedicated to shedding light on small game studios and indie developers.

In the "Interview" section, we'll delve into the world of game development by posing our team's burning questions to the studio's lead developer. This will provide an insightful glimpse into the exciting process of creating games and hopefully ensuring a good read for all our readers!

But that's not all! Our "Spotlight Review" segment brings an extra treat – an additional game review (yay!). In this section, we'll focus our attention on one of the studio's games or perhaps provide a sneak peek of an upcoming release.

We hope that these additions will not only pique your interest but also encourage you to become a dedicated reader of our magazine each month. Simultaneously, we aim to assist small developers by granting them some much-deserved publicity. It's a win-win-win scenario for all involved.

If you happen to be a game developer eager to showcase one of your games or provide a sneak peek of an upcoming masterpiece, please don't hesitate to contact us through our Discord channel!

Thank you for being a part of the SGM community, and we look forward to sharing this exciting journey with you.

Ghostrunner 2 Release Date Officially Revealed After Leak

505 Games has officially confirmed that Ghostrunner 2 is set to launch on October 26 for PC, PlayStation 5, and Xbox Series X|S. The announcement came after the game's release date and pricing details were leaked prematurely.

The leak revealed that the Standard version of Ghostrunner 2 will be priced at \$40, the Deluxe Edition at \$50, and the Brutal Edition at \$70. Preordering the game will grant players the Red Eye Dragon and Golden Traditional sword and hand skins, which will also be available for separate purchase later. Those who opt for the Brutal edition will receive 48 hours of early access to the game.

The first Ghostrunner game, released in 2020, was praised for its fast-paced and skill-focused gameplay, earning it positive reviews.



source: ign.com

Nintendo Confirms Original Mario Voice Actor Charles Martinet Is 'Stepping Back' From Recording

Nintendo has announced that Charles Martinet, the original voice actor for Mario since 1991, will be stepping back from recording character voices for Nintendo games. He will now take on the role of "Mario Ambassador." Nintendo confirmed this news on Twitter and mentioned that fans can anticipate a special video message from Shigeru Miyamoto and Martinet in the future.

Charles Martinet has been the voice behind Mario in Nintendo games for many years, starting with Super Mario 64. Despite his shift away from providing character voices, he will continue to travel the world to share the joy of Mario and engage with fans. Nintendo expressed gratitude for Martinet's contributions and announced the upcoming video message to celebrate his legacy.

Metinnet responded to Nintendo's announcement with excitement, stating that his new adventure begins and expressing his love for fans.

Charles Martinet initially secured the role of Mario after auditioning at a tradeshow where he needed to "talk to people as a plumber." He continued to voice not only Mario but also characters like Luigi, Wario, Waluigi, Metal Mario, and more in various Nintendo games.

In 2021, Martinet had expressed his desire to voice Mario until his last days, but his transition to the role of a Mario Ambassador marks a new chapter in his career while keeping his iconic voice alive.



source: ign.com

NBA 2K24 the Second-Worst-Rated Steam Game of All Time Following PC Backlash

NBA 2K24 has garnered significant criticism from PC gamers on Steam, earning the title of the second-worst-rated game on the platform. Priced at \$60 and developed by Visual Concepts, with publishing by 2K, the game currently has an "overwhelmingly negative" user review rating on Steam.



Complaints from players include the PC version's failure to match the quality of the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X and S versions. There are also concerns about rampant cheating and the absence of cross-play in crucial game modes.

The discontent among PC gamers has grown over time, culminating in a strong backlash following the release of NBA 2K24. Steam reviewers express their disappointment, highlighting the lack of innovation in gameplay and graphics compared to previous versions. Many criticize the full price tag for what they perceive as a lack of substantial improvements.

One major point of contention is the game's aggressive microtransactions, which are seen as worse than ever. These microtransactions are deemed essential for online competition, which has drawn criticism for undermining skill-based gameplay.

IGN's review of NBA 2K24 gave it a 6/10, acknowledging its strong gameplay but condemning the microtransaction tactics. These microtransactions are described as "heinous" and are said to negatively impact popular game modes.

Due to its overwhelmingly negative reception on Steam, NBA 2K24 is now ranked as the second-worst game of all time on Steam250's Hall of Shame, trailing only behind Blizzard's Overwatch 2. This ranking is based on an approval rating of just 11% from 3,391 votes, five days after its release.

source: ign.com

Turok 3: Shadow of Oblivion Remaster Confirmed

Nightdive Studios has announced a Turok 3: Shadow of Oblivion remaster due out later this year.

Nightdive Studios has already released remasters of the first two games in the cult-classic Nintendo 64 first-person shooter franchise. Now it's the turn of Acclaim's Turok 3, which launched in September 2000 on Nintendo's console.

The Turok 3 remaster comes out on PC, PlayStation and Xbox consoles, and Nintendo Switch during the fourth quarter of 2023 (October to December).



Grand Theft Auto 6: Potential Release Window, Leaks, Story, and Latest News

Here's everything we know about Rockstar's next GTA adventure:

GTA 6 Potential Release Date

- A specific release date for GTA 6 has not been officially announced.
- Take-Two Interactive hinted that GTA 6 might be scheduled for their 2025 fiscal year, which runs from April 1, 2024, to March 31, 2025. This suggestion is based on a significant increase in forecasted bookings for fiscal year 2025, possibly attributed to the anticipation surrounding GTA 6.

GTA 6 Platforms

- GTA 6 is expected to launch on PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X|S.
- A PC version is anticipated, although it may not release simultaneously with the console versions, following the pattern of previous Rockstar games.
- There is no confirmation regarding versions for Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, or Xbox One.

GTA 6 Setting

- GTA 6 is rumored to return to Vice City, a fictional representation of Miami.
- The game's code name, Project Americas, suggests that it may include locations in both North and South America, although plans for this have been reported as scrapped to reduce development pressure.
- Reports indicate that GTA 6 will feature more interior locations than any previous installment.

GTA 6 Story and Protagonists

- The game is said to feature two protagonists, resembling a Bonnie & Clyde-inspired story.
- The protagonists may be named Lucia and Jason, with Lucia potentially being the first female playable character in the 3D era of GTA.
- There are limited plot details available, but it is noted that Rockstar is aiming to reduce satire targeting marginalized groups in its writing.

GTA 6 Gameplay Leak

- In September 2022, a significant leak occurred when a hacker accessed Rockstar's network and uploaded 90 GTA 6 videos online.
- The leaked footage showed parts of the game world, gunplay mechanics, and NPC interactions.
- It seemingly confirmed the presence of both male and female protagonists.
- Rockstar had previously filed a patent for more realistic NPC drivers, which may be implemented in GTA 6 to create more immersive AI behavior.

GTA 6 Developer

- Rockstar Games has announced the acquisition of Cfx.re, a Grand Theft Auto 5 and Red Dead Redemption 2 modding team responsible for the highly popular FiveM servers. This leads to believe they will focus on adding new RP elements in the next installement of the franchise.



Red Dead Redemption Fans Await PC Port

Recently, Rockstar Games announced that they would be re-releasing Red Dead Redemption, much to the excitement of fans. However, this announcement was met with disappointment when it was revealed that the re-release would only be available on the Nintendo Switch and PlayStation 4 as a straight port of the original game.

Fans have expressed their frustration, not only because of the £40 price tag for a 13-year-old game, but also because Red Dead Redemption has yet to be announced for PC. This is particularly puzzling considering that Red Dead Redemption 2 and other Rockstar titles are available on Steam.



Fortunately, there is still hope for a PC port of Red Dead Redemption. Strauss Zelnick, CEO of Take-Two Interactive, revealed in an interview with IGN that the decision ultimately lies with the creative teams behind the game. He stated that they consider the vision for the title and determine whether it should be released as a straight port, remaster, or remake.

Given the high demand for a PC version of Red Dead Redemption and the potential for modding opportunities, it seems likely that the game will eventually come to PC. However, as many Red Dead Redemption fans know, it is best not to get their hopes up too high.

source: ign.com

Saints Row studio Volition has been closed down

Volition Games, known for its work on the Saints Row series, has been closed down "effective immediately" as part of the restructuring program announced by parent company Embracer Group. In a statement shared on social media, Volition mentioned that Embracer evaluated its strategic and operational goals, leading to the decision to shut down the studio. Embracer is working to provide job assistance and support for the affected Volition team members.

The closure of Volition comes after the 2022 reboot of Saints Row, developed by Volition, received a disappointing critical and commercial reception. Embracer acknowledged that the game "did not meet the full expectations and left the fanbase partially polarized." Consequently, Embracer announced that Volition would become part of Gearbox, the developer behind Borderlands.

source: eurogamer.net

Bethesda's Todd Howard might've just teased an Indiana Jones reveal for 2024

Todd Howard of Bethesda may have hinted at a potential reveal for the Indiana Jones project in 2024.

The Indiana Jones game, developed by MachineGames, was announced by Bethesda in January 2021, with a promise that more details would come at a later time. It has been kept largely secret, but it was confirmed to be an Xbox and PC exclusive. In an interview with Esquire, Howard discussed the unique aspect of bringing Indiana Jones to video games, focusing on the player's involvement in exploration. When asked about the game, Howard cryptically said, "We'll talk next year" with a smile. While this isn't a confirmation of a 2024 reveal, it has sparked speculation and anticipation among fans.

source: eurogamer.net

Unity Technologies, creators of the Unity Engine, faced backlash from the game development community after announcing changes to its pricing model. Starting from January 1, 2024, Unity will charge a monthly fee per new game install. This move was met with criticism from developers, who are concerned about how it will affect their businesses.

Unity attempted to clarify its position, stating that the fee would only impact a small subset of current Unity Editor users, primarily those with successful games generating substantial revenue. The company emphasized that developers still building their businesses and growing their game audiences would not be affected by the new fee.

Developers were alarmed by Unity's lack of transparency regarding how the fee would be calculated and applied. Unity plans to charge based on its own internal assessment of new installs, using a proprietary data model that it did not fully disclose. This lack of transparency raised concerns about the potential for fees to be applied to pirated games or malicious installations.

Additionally, Unity's new fee structure would apply retroactively to all games already on the market that cross specific revenue and install thresholds, which raised questions about free game giveaways, demos, bundles, and more.

In response to Unity's policy changes, some mobile game developers initiated a boycott by disabling Unity's ad products to force the company to reconsider its Runtime Fee policy. At the time of the article, more than 20 studios had joined the boycott: Azur Games, Voodoo, Homa, Century Games, SayGames, CrazyLabs, Original Games, Ducky, Burny Games, Inspired Square, Geisha Tokyo, Tatsumaki Games, KAYAC, New Story, Playgendary, Supercell, TapNation, Matchingham Games, Moonee, YSO Corp and MondayOFF

The situation escalated when Unity Technologies canceled a town hall meeting and closed two offices due to a credible death threat related to the controversial pricing decision. The company assured that it was taking steps to ensure the safety of its employees and cooperating with law enforcement.

Several game developers, including the creator of the game "Cult of the Lamb," threatened to delete their games from Unity's platform in protest of the new fees. "Among Us" developer Innersloth also announced they will move engines if Unity follows through with pricing changes.

The situation continues to evolve, with developers and Unity Technologies engaging in discussions and actions to address the concerns raised by the new pricing model.



Shadow Gambit And Desperados III Developer Mimimi Games Is Shutting Down

Mimimi Games, known for titles like *Desperados III* and *Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew*, has announced its closure. The studio shared the news on its official website, revealing that *Shadow Gambit* would be their final game, and they will gradually wind down operations over the coming months.

Mimimi cited the demanding nature of game development, with production costs exceeding potential revenue, as a significant factor in their decision to shut down. Balancing work and family life had become increasingly challenging, and managing the studio had become taxing.

While Mimimi Games will cease operations, they have committed to continue supporting *Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew*. An update for the stealth strategy game is planned, along with a "big content drop" later in the year.

Mimimi Games made a name for itself with titles like *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun* and *Desperados III*. Despite the closure, there is hope that the studio's founders, Johannes Roth and Dominik Abé, who still have a passion for video games, may continue their involvement in the industry in the future.

SEGA's \$775 Million Acquisition Of Angry Birds Maker Rovio Has Been Completed

SEGA has officially completed its acquisition of Rovio, the Finnish mobile gaming company known for creating *Angry Birds*. The deal, worth \$775 million USD, marks SEGA's entry into the mobile gaming market. The acquisition includes Rovio's intellectual property, talent, and experience, with over 500 employees joining SEGA.

Haruki Satomi, President and Group CEO of SEGA Sammy Holdings, expressed excitement about the transaction, emphasizing the potential for synergies between the two companies' brands, characters, and fanbases. SEGA aims to expand its presence in the global gaming market, particularly in mobile gaming.

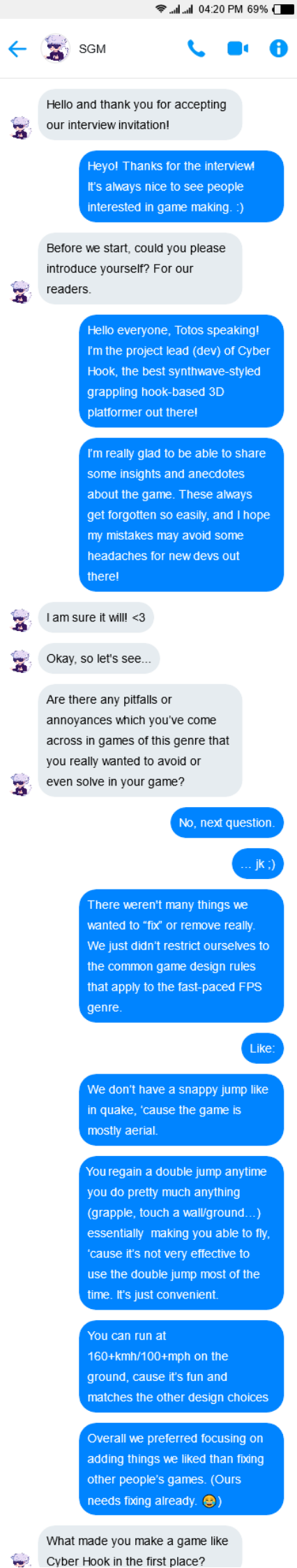
The acquisition comes as mobile gaming evolves, with changing monetization models and subscription services offered by major companies like Apple, Google, and Netflix. The terms of the deal and its implications for the future of the *Angry Birds* franchise were not disclosed, but it represents a significant move for both SEGA and Rovio.

Rovio had previously received an acquisition bid from Playtika Holding Corp for €683 million, which did not materialize. The completion of the SEGA deal solidifies the company's position in the mobile gaming industry.



INTERVIEW

Interview with Totos, Lead Developer of Cyber Hook (Blazing Stick Studios)



True story, I (Totos) just wanted to see if I could wrap a rope around some 3D geometry. It was scuffed, but it kinda worked.

Then, "Oh, you can swing like Tarzan," was followed by, "Oh, I can add some time warp," and then, "Oh, I can learn shaders," which finally led to, "Oh, people are breaking the game."

The production was very well planned and methodically executed. (Psych, I just wanted to around in Unity.)



What was an unexpected or interesting problem you had while making this game?

How about a thousand? It's the point of game making; you spent more time fixing lil' things going haywire than making real progress, or maybe it's just me being disorganised. 🤔

One big issue was to simply make the cubes have pretty borders. Funnily enough, it's pretty tough to have scalable cubes that have regular borders with customizable features. Had to cheat a lot to make it work.
(On the technical side, it's like the four corners of a single side are four squares that have their own texture/image and get scaled individually. All of that has a single line of code to handle all situations.)



What's an average day of game development like for you/your team?

Wake up, procrastinate until 10 AM, start work, get distracted, feel bad, stress out about not making progress, eat, sleep, repeat.

I hope the rest of the team had a better schedule than me. 😊



What emotions or experiences did you want players to feel as they progress through the game?

Freedom and thrill. We wanted to avoid stressing out people too much. That's why we added many features to make your mistakes not matter that much. Just run around and have fun!



How did you balance creativity with technical and time constraints while developing the game? Was there anything significant you had to cut?

The production of Cyber Hook was quite atypical, like not industry standard at all. I was able

to make most of it in my spare time, so I could focus on learning new things and make something I could be proud of. We had to stop production at one point though 'cause any game that has been worked on for more than three years tends to be mentally taxing (you have to deal with your own past mistakes a lot). I did want to add different game modes but had to stop for my own mental health.

Was there any element that you eventually decided you had to cut, but you found it hard to let go of?



We had to cut a few things during the making of the DLC because half the team was already burned out and we didn't realise it (major mistake BTW). We had kick skins made for players but couldn't get them in game 'cause it would have forced us to rework half the code... (Yeah, old mediocre code, I told you.)

What's an important lesson you've learned during the development of the game that you'll carry forward into future projects?



I'm garbage at managing people, including myself. I really need to be better organised but I think that's a lost cause. 😞

Did any games, or media in general, inspire you/influence your work? If so, which?



We had a few inspirations, such as games like Doom, TF2, Apex, and other speedrun oriented games. We tried our best to not steal too many ideas from them, but it's hard when they are so good. 😊

What are your favourite and least favourite trends in gaming today?



Love: games made by people that just enjoy making what they want. (Pizza Tower, Dwarf Fortress, ANTONBLAST (might kick), Rivals of Aether, and many more....)

Dislike: horny bait gacha games. Bro, go watch a , thank you. 🍷

Was there any player feedback that made you change your mind on some design choices?



I wanted to add a way to charge/store speed so you could go from 0 to 100 almost instantly, but the community never understood my superior creative genius. (Ground boost was a

mistake I'm still proud of. ❤️)

When was the last time a design element of a game felt truly fresh or ingenious and really took you by surprise?



Holy , play Pizza Tower, smoothest shit I've ever seen. Almost every design aspect of the game is polished and is there on purpose. (Also something feeling fresh just means you haven't seen it already, and since I'm an uncultured swine, many things feel fresh to me. 😊)

During development, what was the biggest problem you ran into?



Replays were a pain but fun.

Leaderboards were a pain but fun.

Shaders were a pain but fun.

Amazon NUKING our leaderboard service provider without replacement and forcing me to rewrite the whole backend code on another random service was NOT FUN. Fuck Amazon and their fake corpo smile.

In fact, what are some of the biggest struggles you've had?



Not being a bat-dwelling nerd; still struggling with that though. (I've upgraded to a second floor-dwelling nerd; that's an improvement, I guess.)

Was it fun creating the gameplay for Cyber Hook?



Yes! :3

I believe this concludes our first interview for the SGM Magazine!

Thank you so much, Totos! It was an honor :)



Any final words you'd like to share with our readers? :)



I hope this lil' interview wasn't too boring for y'all to read. I intentionally missed the parts about e and hookers 'cause the URSAFF (french IRS UR-never-SAFE bad joke :3) might come after me!

All in all, what really matters to me is that you enjoyed the game and/or might be interested in checking it out.

Feel free to check out our Steam page if you are an elite gamer 😊 or pirate the game if you're not. 😊



CYBER HOOK

Cyber Hook has you sprinting, flying, and manoeuvring through obstacles with the goal of reaching the exit of each level as quickly as possible. This game is fully focused on providing you with the feeling of zipping around at a blistering pace while you use your hook to attach to blocks and swing around like Spiderman, and it succeeds tremendously in that regard.

Levels are constructed from sets of blocks that are suspended in the air. Some allow you to hook onto them, some kill you when you touch them, some do both, some do neither, and some can be destroyed by shooting them. You hook onto blocks by aiming at them and clicking. Clicking again pulls you towards the hook, and jumping releases it. You also have a double jump and the ability to wall run. That's mostly all there is to the basic mechanics, and it doesn't sound like much, but it all comes together to provide some deep and satisfying gameplay. You can do things like hooking onto the ground to get a quick speed boost or tapping your hook onto a block to refresh your double jump, and provided you're playing the game well, you'll always be moving at a cheek-flapping pace, which just feels fantastic.



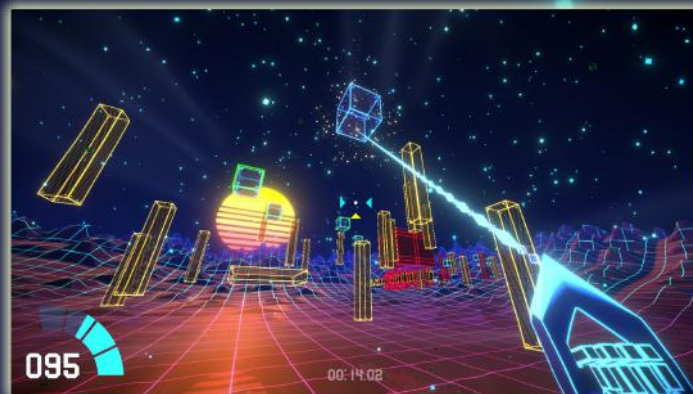
Just beating the levels is simple enough and almost never presents much of a problem. The real game is beating the goal times to get all three gems in a level. The real game is grinding out every frame possible to climb the leaderboards. That's what I would say is one of the main draws of Cyber Hook, where you can truly experience everything the game has to offer as you enter the realm of extreme precision and learn advanced tech like grapple boosts or double wallruns. It's certainly not for everybody, though, and even if the thought of spending hours perfecting a single level doesn't appeal to you, getting all of the gems in each level still provides a pleasant challenge.

Though there are a handful of interesting, memorable levels, including Purple Veins and Hover, the majority feel bland and uninspired, often with blocks haphazardly strewn together and no particular central idea. Some others, like Big Bank, are thematically compelling but aren't the most fun to play. However, despite the unrealized potential in the level design, the core gameplay is still fun enough that even randomly generated patterns could be enjoyable to swing through. Now, normally, the problem of lackluster level design can be solved with a workshop (*cough* Portal 2), which allows players to create their own levels and stretch the game systems to their creative limits. And Cyber Hook actually has a workshop, too! Unfortunately, due to the low player base, there are currently only 58 total levels created, which is a shame because I was looking forward to seeing what people could come up with.

Considering that this is a game where you could be replaying a single level for hundreds of attempts, the music leaves a lot to be desired. Listening to the same track drone on and on in a short, repetitive loop quickly became an earsore and left me wishing for a little more variety. Ideally, there would be a playlist with dozens of tracks on shuffle.

Cyber Hook has a stylistic synthwave aesthetic with the classic sunset and wireframe vector graphics. It's visually appealing, but unfortunately, it has the same problem that the music does since there's only one background throughout all the levels. Other than the background, the levels consist of colour-coded blocks of various shapes and sizes, which are sometimes arranged into well-structured patterns but ultimately are too simple to look great.

There's a story in the game. Yeah, that's pretty much all there is to say about that. It's there. It didn't need to be, and it doesn't add anything or take anything away from the game, but it's there.



If you're the type of person who enjoys learning the intricacies of a level while you build up your muscle memory to try to go for the top leaderboard spot, then this is absolutely the game for you. Otherwise, you might find it to be a decent little game with some fun movement mechanics. Either way, I'd recommend giving it a try.

■ RayOfLight

STORY ★☆☆☆☆
 GRAPHICS ★★☆☆☆
 GAMEPLAY ★★★★★
 SOUND ★★☆☆☆
 FUN METER ★★★★★



- Fun movement
- Colorful graphics



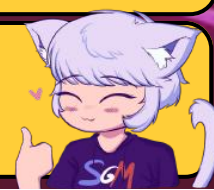
- Level design could be better

VERDICT

Genre: 3D Platformer, Indie
 Developer: Blazing Stick
 Release Date: September 24, 2020

System Req: Intel Dual Core 2
 Ghz CPU, 2 GB RAM, GeForce
 GTX 970, 2 GB available space.

EASY TO
 GET
 HOOKED,



GIVEAWAY

ALIEN RAGE

It's time we offered our readers a shooter!

And Alien Rage - Unlimited is just that, and maybe more! The game reminds me of DOOM. I won't claim it comes anywhere near the Doomslayer, but with over 21 enemy types, huge boss battles, 10 powerful weapons, and an interesting sci-fi setup, I think it can hold its own for the first couple of hours, at least.

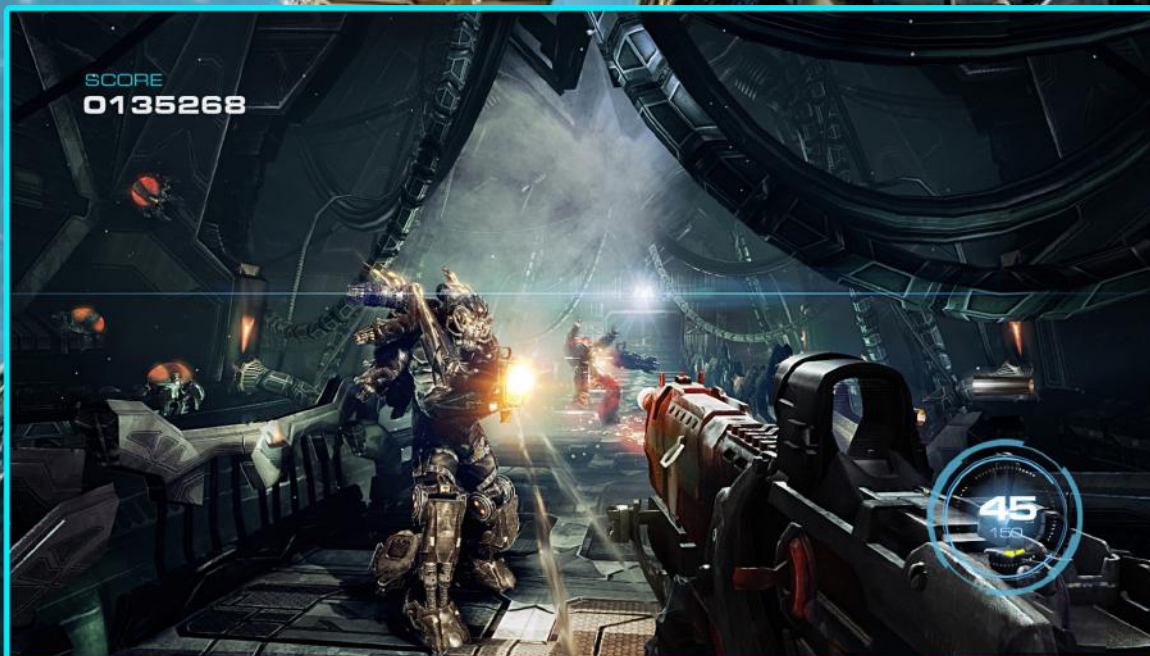
While the game feels arcade-y, it does struggle to balance the AI difficulty. That's the biggest complaint you'll hear about the game.

The difficulty may be high, and you may die plenty of times... but you'll die in a spectacular way! The graphics for this game are beautiful, and considering it came out in 2013 and still holds up (quite nicely, I might say) to this day, it means that the game deserves all the merits it can get on this front alone.

It's also a relatively unknown title. That's usually a bad sign, but in this case, I really don't see a reason why this game didn't gather a fanbase. Or maybe it's a future cult classic?

Who knows! All I know is that we have 7 copies to give away and that its rarity should serve as an extra incentive for you to give it a chance!

■ AtomicBlonde



STAR WARS THE FORCE UNLEASHED

The Force is calling me, letting me roam the most exciting locations in the STAR WARS universe as Darth Vader's henchman.

Developed by LucasArts in 2008 for the PS3 and Xbox 360, and released in 2009 as the Ultimate Sith Edition for the PC, the action game features a classic single-player campaign consisting of a sequential series of combat-oriented missions. (There was even another version released for the Switch in 2022). The infrequent environmental puzzles in which my Force skills are needed feel mostly simple and straightforward. Almost too easy. The real difficulty here lies more in the controls. But more on that later ...

The story starts off epically. We get to clean up Kashyyyk as Lord Vader himself and easily get rid of the pesky furry creatures (Wookiees) with our powerful Force attacks. However, one thing is immediately noticeable in the first few minutes. The levels are very linear, which makes further exploration or getting lost impossible. By the end of the first level, I realize that I will not remain in the role of Vader, but that I will be following the story of Darth Vader's apprentice, Galen Marek. Our Sith Master Vader sends us on a series of sequential and combat-oriented missions in which we have to fight our way through various enemy types. After a few levels, however, it becomes clear ... the structure is always the same ...

In each level we are given a mission with a main objective, which usually consists of eliminating a certain target person. In addition, we are given three secondary objectives and a mission-specific special objective that usually involves destroying objects, reaching a certain score (which is achieved by killing enemies) and collecting holocrons.



Kylo Ren before Kylo Ren

There are up to 15 of them hidden in the levels which, despite the linear stages, are often very well hidden, but sometimes very obvious. But especially, these old Jedi relics bring us a lot of old knowledge, and with it upgrade points, lightsaber colors and crystals, or even costumes. These help us to become stronger in order to overcome the specific enemy types.

In general, you feel clearly superior as a player, since the enemies are rarely a real challenge. The only weapon we have at our disposal against the many enemies is our lightsaber, which we use to slaughter the enemies by executing combos, sometimes on purpose, sometimes at random. In addition, we have access to our Force abilities, which allow us to unlock special combat skills. Some are unlocked



Feel dah FORCEEE!!

automatically with the level progression, others we can unlock ourselves. For this we use three different upgrade points - blue, red and yellow - which we get with every level up. This is obtained by defeating enemies or finding holocrons.

The only displays we need to keep an eye on are health, which recharges by killing enemies, and Force power, which is self-regenerating and should limit how often you use these Force skills. This also makes sense because these Force skills are very powerful. Sometimes you stun an enemy briefly with a Force push, sometimes you send Force lightning on them, sometimes you throw the many crates and environmental objects at them. However, throwing, grabbing and moving objects with the Force skill is very clunky. I usually miss 4 times before a crate actually hits an enemy. Since there are rather few missions where the exact movement by the Force skill is needed, one can ignore these weird controls here. Another shortcoming is that you can't really cancel the combos, which occasionally leads to unintentionally attacking over the edge and falling, or hitting the explosive barrel close to the enemy.

The game is mainly played in third person view, where the camera moves through the levels with the player. In the boss fights, however, the camera takes a fixed position to show more of the arena. This makes it very difficult to properly estimate your own and your opponent's position.

I frequently miss my opponent with my Force push because I can't aim properly. Still, the boss fights are a welcome challenge compared to the rest of the opponents, as you have to learn their attack patterns and weaknesses in battle. But there was one "boss battle" on Raxus Prime near the end where the directions on what to do were not really clear. I had to find a solution online which kind of broke the epicness of the scene.

The story and plot of the game is presented after each level with the help of nice cutscenes. We get to know some of Galen's companions, enemies and allies, but they didn't really become close to my heart due to their rather flat character. The story itself is exciting, but Galen's motivation is hard for me to understand. The game is relatively short and can be played through in just 8-10 hours.

In summary, the game offers simple action and an exciting excursion into a slightly different STAR WARS story. Perfect for several cozy after-work sessions with the controller on the couch, and it receives the Seal of Recommendation from me ... May the Force be with you!

■ MyrXIII



You got PUNKD, yo! Say hi to the camera!

STORY ★★★★★
GRAPHICS ★★★★★
GAMEPLAY ★★★★★
SOUND ★★★★★
FUN METER ★★★★★



- Nice excursion into a somewhat different STAR WARS story
- Solid gameplay and controls
- Varied levels and enemies
- Cool lightsaber battles and a powerful gameplay experience
- Many costumes and lightsaber colors



- Controls and camera perspective during boss fights are weird
- Levels tend to be too linear
- Grabbing, moving and throwing with the Force skills behaves weirdly
- Enemy AI is rather simplistic
- Little character depth in the side characters

V
E
R
D
I
C
T

Genre: Action, Sci-Fi
Developer: LucasArts
Release Date: November 3, 2009
System Req: Intel Core 2 Duo 2.8 GHz, 2 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce 9800 GT, 30 GB available space.

THE FORCE
IS STRONG
IN THIS ONE



I AM



What possessed me to join the giveaway for this game? Apparently I was the only one dumb enough to look at I Am Fish and go, "That's kinda cute. I should try it out." What I didn't know was that it was developed by Bossa Studios. Those are the folks that made I Am Bread and Surgeon Simulator. I have not played the latter, but the former was a game I barely managed to beat the first level of. My reaction upon learning this? "Whoops." Regardless, it was my burden to bear, and bear it I did. You're welcome.



I Am Fish was published by Curve Games and released on Steam and Xbox One/Series X on September 16, 2021. It has the same core gimmicks as Bossa's other games: intentionally crummy controls, janky physics, and the desire to make you suffer. This 'genre' is tricky to get right, as it's hard to balance difficulty and frustration. While this is a difficult game, I felt like it was usually the game's fault rather than my own, which is exactly what a developer should be trying to avoid. Sure, there were times I got myself killed by my own mistakes and stupidity, but there were far too many times I was left going, "Nope, that is nonsense; I did not deserve that death; screw you too."

That's the main selling point of I Am Fish, but one point does not a game make. What about the rest of its facets? It's worth talking about them, because I Am Fish does have its strong points. Its weak points just happen to be much more glaringly obvious.



STORY

This game actually has one.



I wasn't expecting much of a story, so I went in with low expectations. Surprisingly, there's a handful of cutscenes to showcase a passable plot. To summarize, four fish friends live together in a pet shop. They eat some wriggling bread that somehow makes them more intelligent. Different people buy them at the pet shop, and the four fish want to find each other again so they can live freely in the ocean. This might be problematic for the goldfish and piranha, given that the vast majority of their species are not meant to live in saltwater, but hey, at least the pufferfish and flying fish can be happy.

Also, there's a guy named Greg. I'm guessing someone named Greg kicked the developers' puppies and burned down the orphanage they all grew up in together, because if not, I have no idea what their grudge is against this NPC. Greg does not have a good time.

The weirdest part to me is that loudspeakers and random citizens conversing give actual lore to this game. It's unfortunate that the loudspeaker words were difficult for me to hear properly, because I get the impression most of the significant information was there. Then again, how significant are we talking? It's a fish-with-bad-physics simulator. Getting any kind of lore means the extremely low bar has been cleared. Nobody should play this for the story, but the simple narrative it has is enough to link the four fish together.



The gang's all here!



As one might expect from an intentionally goofy game, the graphics mostly forgo realism to embrace cartoon-based art. I enjoyed the charming fish designs, especially with their vibrant colors and endearing facial expressions. It also makes you feel awful for them when you shatter their fishbowls or strand them outside of water. You get to watch them slowly run out of air, the life fading from their panicked eyes, wrapping their tiny fins around their bodies as they desperately gulp for the water they dearly need as the screen slowly fades to black. It's pretty jarring, at least until you get so frustrated by dying countless times that you hit the respawn button before they actually perish.

The humans look pretty good, and the seagulls hide their sinister natures by looking like complete doofs. The environments are a mixed bag in appearance, with some examples being bright buildings, luscious lakes, and scummy sewers. I liked the levels and their atmospheres a lot, and I'd say the graphics and dominant colors helped set them apart along with their gameplay designs. The game isn't focused on having super-sharp graphics, but what it does have is above average in my book.

GRAPHICS

Aw, look at the cute widdle fishies! Now watch them suffer and perish.



This is Greg. Fish make his life hell.

One of my biggest compliments for the game is how diverse and clever some of the ideas for levels are. I expected a lot of similar areas since fish are restricted by water. Lakes, ponds, and rivers are some of the typical locations that were present and that I expected.



But you also have out-of-the-box areas, such as: an outdoor market, where you can glide between stall tops using puddles from a previous rainstorm; a busy highway, where water-filled potholes are your way of continuing forward; a hospital, where you have to use blood to swim through some parts instead of water; a nightclub, where numerous vessels full of water keep you alive; and an airport, where a sprinkler system going off provides you with a watery path forward. I was impressed by this diversity, and I wish the rest of the game had that amount of creativity put into it.



The checkpoint's only several potholes away.



The nightclub's a colorful level with catchy music.



The outside market is my favorite level in terms of creativity.

SOUND

*Repeat the music, not
the chatter.*

I've gotta say, I wasn't expecting *I Am Fish* to have a notable soundtrack. It was a pleasant surprise to hear some legitimately catchy music in most of the levels. Unfortunately, my favorites didn't play as often as I'd have liked, but I never grew tired of the OST. Thank goodness for that, because nothing adds to frustration more than having incredibly annoying music on loop.

No, instead of annoying music on loop, you get to hear annoying voice clips on loop. To clarify, I actually think the voice acting for the human NPCs is pretty good. The casual conversations sound natural, and the people chasing after you have emotional inflections that you would expect from them. The issue is that when you revive at a checkpoint, timed dialogue will play again. This can lead to you hearing the same conversations dozens of times. I especially hated this at the outdoor market. If I ever have to hear those buggers advertising their tomatoes and avocados again, it'll be decades too soon.



GAMEPLAY

Oh, you wanted to have a fun time as a fish? Hahaha, no



This sums up the game pretty well.

The goal of the game is to finish thirteen levels. The first twelve are divided between the four fish, with each getting three levels all to themselves. The last stage is a bit different. While I won't spoil anything, it's a nice conclusion to the levels that lead up to it.

Each of the four fish has a different gimmick. The flying fish can glide, the piranha can bite things, the pufferfish can roll on the ground, and the goldfish... exists. Seriously, the goldfish is more of a generic fish that exists for 'tutorial' purposes. You have to finish the three goldfish levels before you can access the other fish. Once they're available, you can play the other 'storylines' in whatever order you please.

The fish aren't the only diversity the game has. There are tons of different methods of transportation stuffed into this vessel of mediocrity, and they all feel unique in terms of controls. You've got fish bowls (that act like hamster balls), mop buckets, regular swimming, flying as the flying fish, rolling as the pufferfish, and a few other methods of transportation that are best left secret. There's also mason jars, which I reserved a special mention for because [EXPLETIVE] mason jars.



Mason jars are the worst. The WORST.



What all piranhas aspire for.

If there is evidence of some deity hating me, it's that mason jars exist in this game and you are forced to use them. Imagine having to slowly move each side of the jar while trying not to get caught on the corner of something, only to finally get it right and then go flying down a slope where your speed is too much and causes the jar to break, thus rendering all of your efforts meaningless. That was my experience with mason jars, and I will thank you to never bring them up again.

So what about the other types of fish and transportation methods? The fish bowls are frustrating but manageable. The mop bucket is easier to manage, though that's not counting some blind jerk walking into you as you struggle to push it around. The swimming is usually fine, though jumping out of the water can be difficult. Since the goldfish and piranha don't have special methods of movement, there isn't much else to cover about them. The piranha's biting is more used to solve environmental puzzles than anything else, such as pulling open cabinets and tearing off sink handles.

As for the other two fish, the pufferfish was my favorite to play as. It's a lot of fun to leap out of the water, turn into a ball, and roll down slopes to reach other water sections. It led to a flow of gameplay that satisfied me, to the point that I'd happily play a version of this game with just pufferfish levels. The flying fish is the opposite, as it is easily the most frustrating of the lot. Imagine trying to control a paper airplane. Now make it much more stiff. Also add a healthy dose of said airplane not doing what you want it to half the time. This is a fraction of what it feels like to play as the flying fish. I might wish it on my worst enemy, but not anyone else.



The worst surgeon ever. Why couldn't it be a sturgeon?

THE MANY DEATHS OF FISH

A Not-So-Philosophical Look at Dying in I Am Fish.

Due to playing as mostly-helpless fish, you are constantly in danger from the many, many threats around you. These include, but are not limited to: bad physics, seagulls, light breezes, cars, Greg, collapsing construction sites, being outside of water too long, people not watching where the bloody heck they're going, falling too far, six-pack pop rings, used needles, plastic cups, and a baffling surgeon named Nigel who prioritizes murdering fish over the patient he's operating on. My personal favorite is when you die from the game initiating a triggered cutscene for moving a fish from one location to another, only for the execution to be botched. That causes the fish to never make it to the next water section, thus dying through no fault of your own. (Well, technically it's your fault because you decided to play I Am Fish, but I mean outside of that.)

Speaking of the game breaking, I encountered a glitch in the flying fish's final level that made it impossible for me to finish a section. It involves suitcases that are supposed to be moving on an airport conveyor belt. The suitcases were, in fact, not moving. According to the Steam forums, a lot of people had issues with glitches in this level, but I didn't see any about this specific issue.

There are a lot of checkpoints in the game, so that does help with the copious amount of dying. What I'm not fond of is that the checkpoint skipping also acts as a band-aid for the fact that there's no mid-level saving. I literally spent over an hour and a half on one level and didn't want to quit because it would mean restarting the whole thing. While I could have skipped to the last checkpoint I was at, it'd get rid of my progress in collectibles and make it impossible to have a time for the finished level.



There should be suitcases on the first belt. Nice glitch, guys.

Luckily, I Am Fish has a feature where you can skip to the next checkpoint in a level. This meant I was able to skip the glitched section and beat the level. I wasn't happy I had to do that, as I wanted to beat the entire game myself, but that was my only option for continuing. On one hand, I like the idea of being able to skip to checkpoints in case a section gets too frustrating and a player wants to move on. On the other, I'd prefer the game to be difficult in a fair fashion, so the checkpoint skipping doesn't feel as tempting to use. I'd also much prefer that the game not glitch out, but here we are.



To clarify, there are two aspects to fully completing a level. One is that each level has five pieces of bread to collect. The other is to finish in a certain amount of time, which is rated out of five stars. These are unimportant for beating the game, but you can't access the bonus level unless you have at least 40 of each. Skipping to further checkpoints immediately disqualifies you from getting a rating above one star, and you have to actually finish the level with the bread in your possession to claim it.

At least you have checkpoints in a normal playthrough and can die as many times as you want. That doesn't extend to Iron Fish mode, which takes away all checkpoints and makes you start from the beginning whenever you die. There's also an alternate control scheme called Bossa Style, which is far worse than the normal one. These sound like hell on earth, and I refuse to take part in them, which means I am never getting all of the achievements in this game unless I change my mind on that. Tough cookies.

CONCLUSION
Do you really want to be a fish?

Some might be surprised to hear that I didn't regret playing I Am Fish. It had its fun moments, and I enjoyed aspects of it. But is it worth recommending? Well, I wouldn't go around suggesting people play it. There are far better games out there. If it was difficult in a fair manner, then I'd be okay with suggesting it to players that like a challenge. Unfortunately, it's difficult due to frustrating controls and bad physics, which makes it hard to recommend.

I'd suggest at least waiting for it to be on sale instead of spending \$20 USD on it, which is its base Steam price. You might get some fun out of it, but don't say I didn't warn you about its numerous issues.

One exception, though: if you hate someone named Greg and want him to suffer, this is the game for you.



This is why we need mid-level saves.

■ Celtic7Guardian



STORY ★★★★★
GRAPHICS ★★★★★
GAMEPLAY ★★★★★
SOUND ★★★★★
FUN METER ★★★★★



- Lots of fun ideas for levels
- Four unique fish lead to different gameplay styles
- Colorful and cartoony graphics are fitting and cute
- Collectibles and time-based level ranks give replayability
- Greg



- Some control schemes are rage-inducingly bad
- Gamebreaking glitches exist
- Lack of direction can lead to frustration in longer levels
- No mid-level saving
- Greg

VERDICT

Genre: Adventure, 3D Platformer System Req: Intel Core i5-3470, 6 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 960, 12 GB available space.
Developer: Bossa Studios
Release Date: September 16, 2021

GREAT IF YOU'RE
A MASOCHIST OR
REALLY, REALLY
WANT TO BE A
FISH



CELESTE

Celeste is an indie game developed by Maddy Makes Games and Extremely OK Games in 2018. It stood out and won in the categories Best Independent Game (Indie) and Best Game with Social Message, in addition to being one of the nominees for Game of the Year in 2018.

The game tells the story of Madeline, a young woman whose goal is to climb the mountain. During her journey she will meet characters who will help her (or not) to overcome her challenges. The game deals very well with delicate themes through figures of speech and jokes to avoid the "heavy atmosphere." Throughout our journey the main character constantly suffers from panic and depression, which are demonstrated with the introduction of a new character: her inner self/split personality.



Madeline hugging a crystal heart.

The average completion time of the seven chapters is around six hours, while for those looking for platinum it can easily exceed 30 hours of gameplay.

For me, the big factor that makes Celeste stand out from most games is its gameplay, which is very reminiscent of the classic Super Meat Boy. You don't kill enemies; you just have to go through the levels "peacefully." The gameplay combined with difficulty promotes an incredible experience. It is very fluid and the increase in new skills and different scenarios makes the game not repetitive.

*** DIFFICULTY ***

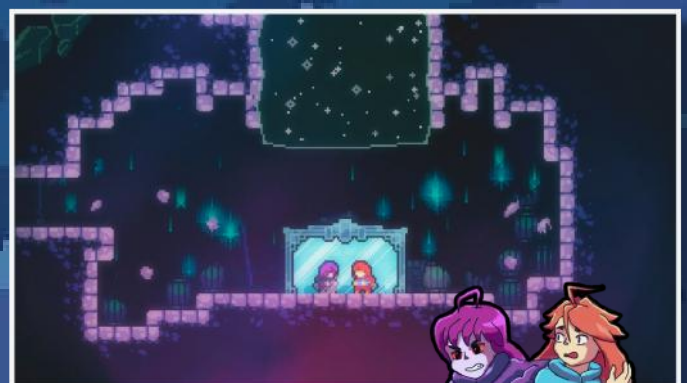
Celeste requires the player to have sharp reflexes and a good level of concentration. The player must advance through the nine chapters (seven for the main story and two optional post-game) of the game with jumps and dashes.

The difficulty of the game increases as the levels are overcome. Each level won offers a feeling of immense reward since the difficulty scales are based on the level you are. For you to have an idea, during the seven stages of the base game, I had a total of 1,304 deaths, while the last two stages had 4,216 deaths. That's right, it was almost four times more deaths than the base game. Therefore, if you like challenges you should complete all stages.

There is also an assist mode that can make it easier for those who are struggling to progress, making it accessible to all types of players.



Grandma's house.



First contact with your "inner self".

SCENERY AND SOUNDTRACK

The pixel art graphics are beautiful and pleasant, demonstrating all the affection that the developer had with the development of the game.

It's very difficult to criticize Celeste, but if there's something that bothers me, it's the background music. I had the impression that the music trumps the sound effects in certain scenarios. I didn't like it and turned it off in the middle of the game. Don't get me wrong, the background music is very good; I just felt that there were ups and downs during the course of the game.



PROGRESS						
Forsaken City	12/20	73	0	20:30.579		
Old Site	10/18	65	294	1:12:39.973		
Celestial Resort	12/25	182	183	1:21:01.133		
Golden Ridge	12/29	130	0	42:01.117		
Mirror Temple	17/31	156	0	1:05:14.556		
Reflection	-	175	0	1:06:41.537		
The Summit	21/47	523	0	2:10:13.370		
Core	1/5	265	0	1:01:00.406		
Farewell	-	3951	13:13:16.464			
TOTALS	85	5998	22:14:43.073			

My death stats in the main story (blue skull) and post-ending (red skull).

CONCLUSION

Come on, Celeste is a complete and indispensable package for anyone who likes indie games. It was certainly one of the best games of the genre I've ever played and will easily please most gamers. In addition, the game has low computer requirements, not needing a video card to run smoothly.

MrPerry



SGM | PAGE 30

STORY	★★★★★☆☆
GRAPHICS	★★★★★★★★
GAMEPLAY	★★★★★★★★
SOUND	★★★★★☆☆
FUN METER	★★★★★☆☆



- Challenging gameplay
- Emotional story
- Beautiful art and music
- Adjustable game speed
- Replayability



- High difficulty
- Steep learning curve
- Short

VERDICT

Genre: Adventure, Platformer
Developer: Maddy Makes Games
Release Date: January 25, 2018

System Req: Intel Core i3 M380,
2 GB RAM, Intel HD 4000, 2 GB
available space.

CELESTE IS
REACHING
THE STARS



AMERICAN TRUCK Simulator

"Come on, you can't name a truck after a chick." – Dwayne Johnson

I was lucky to be able to choose between two games to play and make a review. I could have chosen *Desperados III*, a real time tactics game, a genre which I have loved since playing the original *Commandos*. It's set in a Wild West setting; a story-driven game. Everything seems to indicate that I would have loved it.

But... I chose *American Truck Simulator*.

A game about driving a truck? Why? I want to get home after working just to get a game about working? Am I German now?

The reason was that I wanted to play something new and that I had never done before. Something "weird". A game about working as a truck driver sounded just right. Well, if *Euro Truck Simulator 2* has sold 13 million copies and 80 million DLCs have been purchased in 10 years, it means that I am not that crazy.

I started working as a lowly, broke freelance driver. The simulation part was good. The truck was responsive and it was fun starting the game and seeing all the traffic around me. I would get hired to do delivery jobs where the truck was given by the employer. That was good to start learning. However, I found the map too small. There were only two US states: California and Nevada, and as a free DLC, Arizona. (If you want all the DLCs, it's going to cost you 186,70€. Quite expensive. And more DLCs are coming, including US states Nebraska and Kansas). Sorry, you can't go on Route 66 from one coast to another. Fuel expenses are also paid by the employer. However, since you have to hurry up and do the jobs, you can't really go sightseeing. Each job earns you XP and money, which levels up the driver and unlocks new skills. For instance, you get more money if you deliver on time, you can drive more expensive or fragile cargo, or you can get the certification to transport explosives or hazardous goods, etc.



After earning enough money, I tried to buy a truck, but it was too expensive. So I took a loan out with a bank (Ok, the bank owns you now. That part is realistic.) and I bought my own truck. I started taking more lucrative jobs. But then again, all the expenses on the truck, maintenance, and fuel were on me.

Do you know the worst part of driving a truck? That it's not like driving a car. You have this HUGE trailer behind you and you have to be careful with turning around corners and parking at destinations. Or you are going to hit other drivers and signs. Repairs are expensive. Going backwards with the trailer is simply hell. When you deliver the cargo, there are three options. The first option which gives you a lot of experience, but you have to pull some complicated backing up and maneuvering. The second option, less experience, which is basically moving it a little bit. The third option, just skip entirely parking the truck and earn no experience. The fact that you have this third option tells you how difficult it is to park. I would always use option two, and half the time it would get so complicated I would give it up.

Have you ever driven a car? Then you know what it's like to meet a truck while on the road: they are too slow, they don't let you see in front of you, the only thing you want to do is to quickly get past them. Playing American Truck Simulator at the very least gave me the chance to see the other side. Trucks are necessary for cities, you know. We truck drivers really drive a lot of stuff around that is necessary for your survival. And we really try to not hit other cars, even if I actually did, quite a few times. But hey, I really tried. Try driving and maneuvering with that trailer. Once I hit the same car two times. Once entering a fuel station, while the driver was arriving and again getting out while the same driver was leaving the station. If the driver had gotten out of the car with a shotgun it would have felt justified. I'm lucky I just get hit by fines. Same as driving over the speed limit, which happens easily. So all my hard work and still so much money lost to fines. There are also fines for driving over the rest limit.



San Angelo

Junction

San Antonio



The rest limit is actually fun. If the police catch you tired (with psychic powers I guess), they fine you. Ok, sleep. Easy, right? Imagine you are running tired after driving for 12 hours straight. You should rest. But you are just 42 minutes till you reach your destination (not real time 42 minutes). If you pull off now and sleep you lose the extra earnings that you don't really need (you have to be really bad to end up losing because of debts) but it's so, so close. It would be so easy to deliver the cargo and then find a rest stop and take a nap. And you wasted a lot of time getting the XP to get extra time rewards. So let's do it a little bit longer... but then... your eyes close, you try to stay on course and suddenly you have smashed into another truck. Is that how real accidents happen? Well, let's admit American Truck Simulator is realistic then.

Driving the truck was relaxing. But after a while... it got boring. I would drive the truck from point A to point B. I would have to be careful not to miss the exit. After the trip, I would refuel, get some sleep, go to another company place to get a new delivery, and start again. What do drivers do during all that time driving? Listen to the radio, podcast, audiobooks? I got a free month of Audible and started listening to audiobooks while playing. Immersion, you know. I listened to a World War I history book, where I learned multiple interesting tidbits, like blood banks were created during WWI. Then I listened the extremely interesting Santiago Posteguillo's historical novel The Assassins of the Emperor about the coming to power of Roman emperor Trajan. Maybe I should have been playing country music, but there is only so much immersion I can do.



Listening to the prose was good, but driving, and playing the game was a bit... boring, after a while. So I got another loan with the bank (Second time. They own you.) and I bought another truck, and hired a driver. I couldn't manually control the drivers so they did what they wanted, working like me, sometimes better (a lie), almost always worse. Still, it was relaxing not having to worry too much about the drivers. This is driving simulator, not a business tycoon simulator. I could choose where to allocate their experience points, but that was it. How good or bad they worked was out of my hands.

After that I kept doing deliveries and I kept making money. After a long time, I got enough and I hired another driver, who I fired because he was lousy, and I hired another one. Again, I started making deliveries and earning more money because my level was getting better, and from delivering more expensive cargo. I improved the garage again and I hired another driver. I finally stopped playing, because I was getting bored. I was playing because I wanted to hear how Roman commander Trajan would survive Rome's chaotic situation, not because I was actually enjoying the game.

As a simulator, it was exciting to get into the cities and see the views. The production values are good. The cabin of the vehicle is extremely detailed and you can add multiple personal touches, or even download mods for that. The environments and cities are really nice and are based on their real-life counterparts. Entering Los Angeles or Las Vegas is always striking. Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge to enter San Francisco is beautiful. But at the end, after a few hours, it was always the same.

So this is a difficult game to review. I quite understand that a lot of people will simply love the game. Cruising into the night, hitting the freeways and listening to the radio while looking at the people, only worrying about getting the delivery on time and not even that much at that, feeling the serenity of the road. But I didn't really feel that way. Which I don't feel is the fault of the game. It's simply that these kinds of games appeal to a certain type of player and I am not that type.

■ quijote3000

STORY N/A

GRAPHICS ★★★★★

GAMEPLAY ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

FUN METER ★★★★★



- Good experience if you're into trucks
- You get to drive into LA and Las Vegas or get to cross the Golden Gate Bridge
- Cabin customization
- Relaxing
- You have an excuse to listen to podcasts or audiobooks while playing



- Either you love it, or get bored
- Cities are not THAT detailed
- No tutorial to teach you how to park with a trailer
- Trucks are slow
- A little bit of story would be nice

V
E
R
D
I
C
T

Genre: Simulator, Open World
Developer: SCS Software
Release Date: February 2, 2016

System Req: Intel Quad core CPU
3.0 GHz, 6 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce
GTX 760, 7 GB available space.



THE TRUCKIN'
LIFE AIN'T
FOR PAIGE





Armello

Once upon a time,
in the middle of
winter... Or
summer?
Doesn't matter. The
King is rotten. It's a
power struggle for
the throne, which is
the seat of power in
this kingdom.

Are you familiar with board games? Maybe you always wanted to get to know more about it, but the complexity of the rules scared you away? Armello is an excellent representative of the genre.

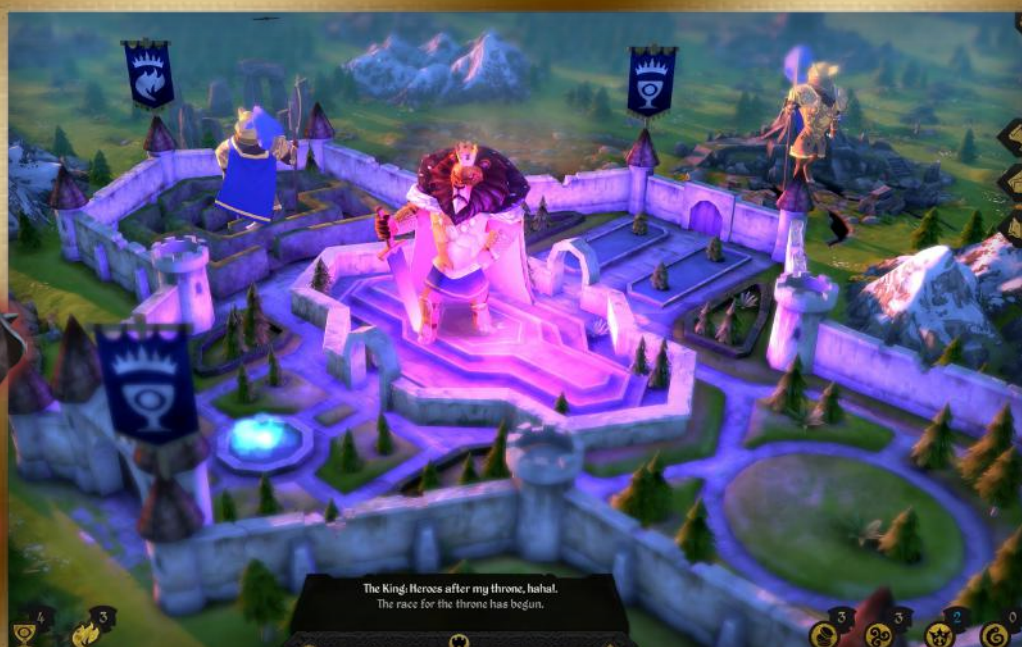
The game is very similar to the Runebound board game. You've got a field here that heroes move across, action points you spend each move, a full hand of cards with amazing art, a small inventory, and the main villain, the Lion King!

No, not the one from the cartoon; this is an evil lion. More precisely, not evil, but corrupted.

The plot is simple: the king was struck by the rot and went mad, and you need to save the kingdom by enthroning a new king. Of course, the ideal candidate is ourselves, but the competitors for the throne categorically disagree with this. That's all. No more story.

There are 8 characters in the base game, 2 from each faction. Fearless wolves, wise bears, cunning rats, and explorer rabbits.

In addition to the base game, there are DLCs that expand the number of characters. Each faction has its own advantages: bears are good at magic, wolves are good at fair fights, rabbits are great at



exploring the world around them, and rats are struggling behind the scenes, stealing gold or hiding in the shadows.

So, you can get the royal throne in the following ways:

- By defeating the king in a fair fight. The King is dead, long live the King!

- Become the most prestigious, most worthy contender for the throne. Accumulate prestige points, and as soon as the king dies (for natural reasons or by taking with him a loser who could not survive the battle with the king), the most obvious contender for the throne is the one who has the highest prestige. A great option for pacifists, but quite risky. After all, competitors are not asleep.
- Become the new rotten king. Not just to kill the king and take his place, but to kill the king, having even more rot than the king. Did you think it would be a fairytale with a happy ending? MWAHAHAHA!



The 3D graphics are frankly outdated, but this is not the main thing. As befits a good board game, the game has stunningly beautiful animated art on the cards.

- Try to save the current king after all. There must be a way to save the king! Collect healing stones of spirits and help cleanse the king. In gratitude, receive the throne.

At the beginning of each turn, draw cards into your hand. These can be items, spells, or tricks. Walk across the hexagonal field, capture settlements kill competitors or monsters, complete quests.



Quests give stats as a reward. And if you take a chance, you can get an item or even a companion.

In the process, local creatures of rot, which crawl out of the dungeons every night, will try to bite you. Other candidates for the throne will try to kill you. And the king sometimes arranges tricks.

The king's health is eroding rot, at dawn and dusk he loses 1 health, so you have to hurry. For breaking the law, the king can announce a reward for your head, and all nearby guards will try to kill you too. At every dawn, the prestige leader receives the honorable right to advise the king on which king's declaration to accept. There are only two options, but this is enough to gain an advantage over other contenders for the throne.

Achieve your goals and celebrate the victory.



The lack of a story campaign is disappointing. Perhaps if you think of the game as a competition, this is not so important, but I like the presence of at least a small story campaign. I really like it when you get attached to the characters and pick out your favorites among them.

The art on the cards is very beautiful. Looking at them is a pleasure. Perils is an interesting thing: it seems that something bad happens to you, but it allows you to burn unnecessary cards to free your hand for more useful ones.

The gameplay is good, but there is no variety at all. The conditions for winning are always the same; there are no variables other than random tile placement. On the other hand, if you like the mechanics, you can play this game many times, match after match, improving your speed at achieving your goals.

Multiplayer is great! But it was quite difficult for me to learn the game because the AI is too easy to beat and real people play too well. There is no medium difficulty. Maybe I'm wrong, but the magic looks too strong. Magic allows you to finish off opponents at a distance, quickly move to the



quest goal, receive powerful buffs for several moves, and more. The influence of randomness on victory is quite strongly felt, and I like it. The necessary cards may not come for a long time, and the dice may fall as unprofitably as possible.



cerenara

STORY

GRAPHICS

GAMEPLAY

SOUND

FUN METER

★☆☆☆☆

★★★★☆

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

VERDICT

• Beautiful 2D art

• High replayability

• Multiplayer

• No story

• The magic seems too strong

Genre: Board Game, Fantasy System Req: Intel Quad core CPU
Developer: League of Geeks 2.5 GHz, 4 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce
Release Date: September 1, 2015 GTX 760, 4 GB available space.

NAVIGATE THE KINGDOM, SEIZE THE CROWN, RULE OR RUIN.



The Last Campfire



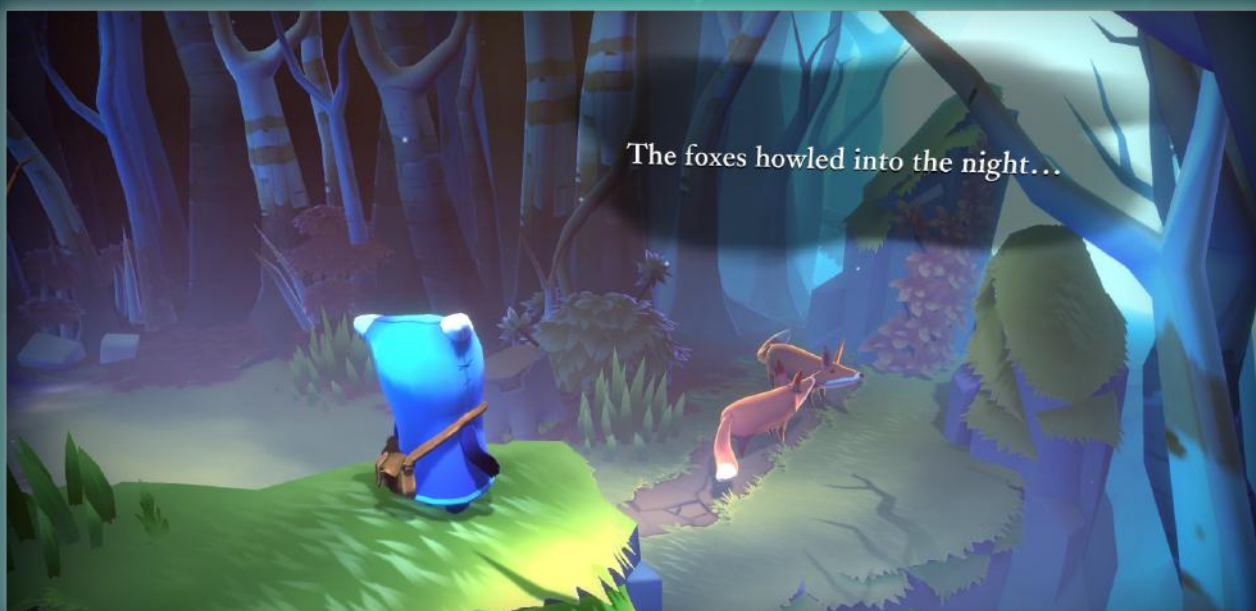
Intro

The Last Campfire is a game that was on my wishlist for a while. Still, like many other games on my wishlist, I didn't remember why I added it in the first place. I think I liked the game art on its Steam page, and I noticed it had Overwhelmingly Positive reviews, and that was enough (please don't judge me; we've all been there). I knew it was a puzzler, but had no clue about anything else until I booted it up for this review, and boy, what a good surprise that was.

Plot

This is a game that relies on mystery to unravel its plot. We are led through a short intro that introduces the world we inhabit. There are mysterious beings ritualistically navigating through a channel on boats, apparently to some sacred place, and one of them misses the entrance and drifts away into the darkness. Most of the storytelling's hard work is done through cinematics and audio instead of being exposed through text, and it contributes to the mystique of the situation. It turns out that when you gain control of the main character (named Ember), you have a faint idea of what just happened, but you don't know for sure, and this works in the game's favor. A lot of the game relies on figuring out the answers to these questions.

As I mentioned, the storytelling in *The Last Campfire* relies a lot on environmental cues instead of extensive exposition of lore documents or long dialogues with NPCs. I can't help but contrast it to *Vambrace: Cold Soul*, a game I won recently here on SG that presents its lore through a Codex, an in-game item that allows you to read extensive texts about everything, from the world's races to myths to places to Gods. *Vambrace's* gameplay would frequently be interrupted so I could read a static page with lots and lots of words, and it was so boring that I disengaged very quickly from both lore AND gameplay. This is a flaw that *The Last Campfire* manages to avoid by integrating lore into the environment, some brief narrated dialogues, and short cinematics.



Trying to avoid spoilers, your main goal is to figure out where you are (and, to a certain extent, what you are), what happened to the Wanderer (the character we see in the intro that we "communicate" with through their diaries), and how to escape from this place and rescue as many "forlorn" as you can on your way out. Forlorn are travelers who lost hope and turned to stone, and to rescue each of them, you need to solve an associated puzzle (more in the gameplay session). Each chapter in the story brings different characters and settings into the fray. It's a short yet effective game, and the vagueness of how everything works contributes to keeping it engaging.

Upon deeper reflection, I believe the reason why I found this game so beautiful and haunting is that it deals with very human themes: fate, destiny, acceptance, hope, sadness, despair, etc. These themes are subtly incorporated into the lore, and it becomes much more interesting to analyze these psychological elements than learning about wars in fictional kingdoms between alien races, which is the direction many other games go. The actual plot twist becomes very evident two-thirds of the way in but does not detract a bit from the experience.

Graphics

The game's graphics are good. There are no humans in the game, and there are very few characters besides the embers, which are shaped like big potato sacks. So character detail is not a big deal, and the developers were clearly not going for photorealism. That said, they executed really well under the premise they adopted – the models and animations are really good, and while I don't want to use the term lifelike to describe them, they feel very natural. Again, while the textures are not incredibly detailed, it's clear to see that a lot of polish was involved in anything graphic-related. Each ember is similar in shape, but also unique in its colors and identifying features (like the signs on their foreheads). The amount of effort put into making the game look good is very evident, and it's impressive how expressive the characters are given the lack of detail in their facial expressions. A lot of it comes from the use of audio (more in the next section), but it wouldn't work without the proper visual cues. Kudos to the developers.

The HUD disappears when you're moving, and even when it's visible, it is unobtrusive, which is a blessing given how beautiful the world and characters look. There are elegant interaction cues when you get close to objects and NPCs. The world you inhabit varies a lot between dark and light areas, but all of them are easily recognizable and carry a lot of character – the world helps to tell the game's story and to drive it forward. The same can be said about the puzzle worlds, the ones you're transported to every time you're trying to save a forlorn. They are simple, but almost always very expressive, beautiful, and soothing.

I would have to say that the weakest part of the graphics is the environmental effects. They are not terrible, just plain. Seeing what the team did with the rest of the game, it's clear to me they could have done a better job with the water effects, the wind blowing against the grass, etc. Given that this is a very small team (with only three people), it seems they were very deliberate about where to spend their efforts. One effect that looks exceptionally good is fire, which makes sense given the game is about campfires 😊. Consequently, lights and shadows work really well too.

To wrap up this section, I've encountered two or three graphical glitches, like getting stuck in a level's geometry or passing through invisible walls. The geometry one almost forced me to restart the game, but it resolved itself quickly enough. I don't expect these to be fixed anymore (I don't think the devs are still updating the game), but they are minor bugs and not game-breaking, so it's not such a big deal.



Sound

I feel the game's sounds are one of the most divisive areas. For me, it was the game's strongest suit, even stronger than the core gameplay. But I've seen a bunch of reviews criticizing the voice acting (which I found beautiful and haunting), and I can see where they are coming from.

The "issue" with the voice acting is that we only have one voice actress for the whole game, and the same person reads all lines of dialogue. That narrator tries to add some personality whenever they are impersonating or quoting a game's character, and it can feel forced or repetitive for some people. For me, instead, it felt like a childhood memory – having a loved one read a fairytale book with the same voice from beginning to end, but changing intonation to denote different characters. It was bittersweet and nostalgic, but its efficacy depends a lot on the emotional baggage the player carries and their experiences being exposed to storytelling in this form. Another common criticism of the voice acting is that the actress sounds very childish – I've seen comparisons to Bjork, for example. While I think this is a valid criticism, I don't think this detracts from or minimizes the experience – I consider this a positive aspect of the voice acting, actually. I cannot remember another narrated game where I found the VA talent so mesmerizing and had such a hard time skipping dialogue.

The music in the game also helps to take it to the next level. It is mostly atmospheric and instrumental, with no vocals, but I feel it adjusts to each game moment so perfectly – sorrowful at times, energetic at others, contemplative even. I couldn't really tell when the music transitioned, given how well it was integrated into the game design. In the same way, I mentioned that the game's graphics, camera angles, and general photography do a lot of the heavy lifting for the story, and this is also true of the soundtrack – it is involving, dictating how you should be feeling at every moment, and is so effective that you barely realize what is going on. The designers clearly control the game's pacing and emotional overtones at each moment using this combination of sound and visual setting. This is probably why it is so hard to put the game down once you start playing.

The environmental sound effects are mostly okay – clearly polished, but not as impressive or varied as the soundtrack and voice acting. It's well done and hard to criticize, but also kind of unremarkable. I like to think they let the other aspects of the game shine and never get in the way, and that's the least I could ask.



Gameplay

The game consists mostly of exploring large hub areas and, from there, jumping into short puzzles to free forlorn embers. Once you have rescued enough forlorn embers in an area, you can move to the next. This progression gate works well because you don't need to solve all the puzzles in a certain area to advance - you can leave one or two of the most problematic and move on with the story. That's a great way of rewarding completionists without impeding progress for people who struggle with puzzles.

Ember's move set and commands are really limited, which works great in the game as it keeps things simple and focused. He can't jump or attack or be hurt; it's all about moving (and dashing) and interacting with levers, boxes, platforms, keys, statues, and anything else that can be turned into a puzzle. When you first get into an area, you usually have to do a puzzle for some quirky character, and after that, you light the local campfire and start looking for forlorn embers around. The lack of danger and fail states allow you to explore without rush, to your heart's content, and that's what makes this game really relaxing.

The hub areas are fun to traverse and have simple embedded puzzles that allow quicker navigation on subsequent visits and a lot of shortcuts. These shortcuts don't necessarily save you a lot of time, but it always feels good to find them, and it helps to keep you going around the area until you are done exploring.



For me, that meant freeing all the forlorn embers and collecting all the "memories" - small pieces of lore that also double as collectibles and worldbuilding memorabilia. It's easy to see which collectibles are missing in each area, and you can easily 100% of the game on your first run. Heck, I even missed 2 of the 42 collectibles and still got 100% achievements on Steam! If you still needed any evidence that this is a chill game, then there you go.

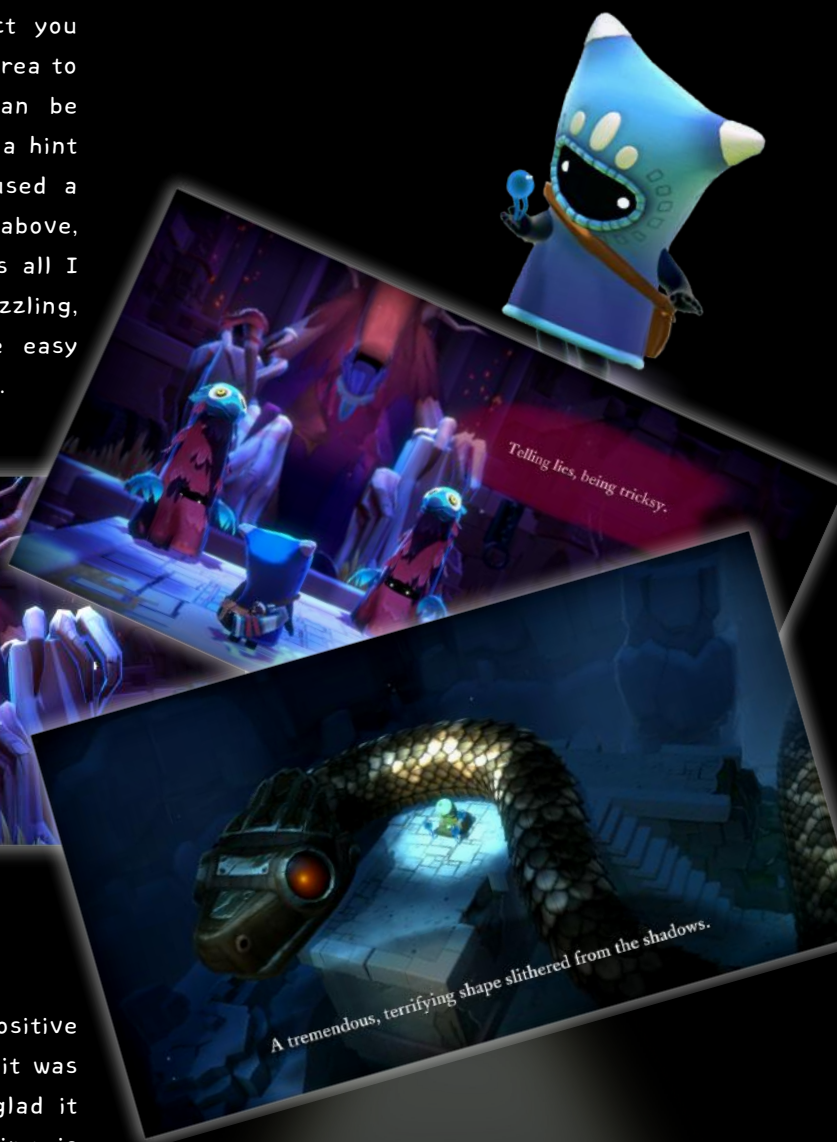
Now, the puzzles you need to complete to free forlorn embers are very easy, yet not immediately obvious - some might even be slightly difficult, but they're never frustrating. The last puzzle game I really got into was *Baba Is You*, where it was not unusual for me to spend 45 minutes at each puzzle and eventually give up in a panic, questioning my life's choices (and my IQ). The closest I got to that in *The Last Campfire* was in a single puzzle ("High Expectations", for those who played the game). I spent 20 minutes trying everything, eventually dropped it, did everything else in the area, returned to it, and solved it in 2 minutes. The game is meant to be forgiving, and I wouldn't be surprised if the main audience is small kids given the challenge curve, but yeah, the game got me at least this one time. Good try, game.



very meta...



If you eventually get stuck in a puzzle, though, good luck. There are no hints. The fact you don't need to beat all the puzzles in an area to advance helps in that sense, but it can be frustrating if you just want a nudge or a hint in a specific puzzle. I almost, almost used a walkthrough for the puzzle I mentioned above, but stepping away from it for a bit was all I needed. In the end, be it exploring or puzzling, this game is a treat to play, and the easy controls help to keep the experience light.



Conclusion

The Last Campfire was an incredibly positive surprise for me. I wasn't even sure why it was on my Wishlist when I won it, but I'm glad it was. The "Overwhelmingly Positive" rating is well justified - this is a game made by people who love what they do, and it shows. It is extremely polished, and it's clear the devs went for quality over quantity, polish over scope creep. For a team of three, this is really outstanding and shows a great understanding of project management. I'm more curious to play No Man's Sky, their most famous game, now that I've seen what they are capable of. The game is really well paced. It is over before it gets old, but at the same time, you're left wishing you could have just a bit more.

■ Fernandopa



STORY	★★★★☆
GRAPHICS	★★★★☆
GAMEPLAY	★★★★☆
SOUND	★★★★★
FUN METER	★★★★★



- Accessible gameplay
- Music and voice acting is top notch
- The game is over before it gets old
- Good exploration of emotional themes



- Too short for full price (\$14.99)
- Low replayability
- Puzzles are on the easier side and might not be challenging for most gamers, but a few are difficult and provide no hints

VERDICT

Genre: Adventure, Puzzle
Developer: Hello Games
Release Date: October 7, 2021

System Req: Intel Core i5 2.8 GHz, 8 GB RAM, AMD RX 5600 XT, 3 GB available space.

A LASTING
AND
WARMING
EXPERIENCE



STYX

MASTER OF SHADOWS

Styx: Master of Shadows is an origin story game that was developed by Cyanide Studio and released in 2014 as a prequel to Of Orcs and Men. The studio was mostly focused on making cycling games, so Styx was their first stealth game, and it shows. Up until 2014, we already had great stealth games such as Splinter Cell, The Last of Us, Dishonored, and Hitman: Absolution. However, the developers appeared to not seek any inspiration to avoid plagiarism and made their own completely original game. Did they make a good game?

Not exactly, and here's why:



Story

First of all, the story is not very well developed, and many holes in the plot have to be filled by the player's imagination. Perhaps the lore is explored more in the previous or following titles, but in *Styx: Master of Shadows*, there isn't much of it.

Don't get me wrong; the world is alright and gets the player interested, but the storytelling method remains quite questionable. Apart from the usual dialogue between Styx and other NPCs, there are guard talks that you could eavesdrop onto to get slightly immersed, but they are rare and do not bring much to the table. The loading screen tips, on the other hand, are short and very revealing, which surprised me a lot. Not only do they contain minor spoilers as to what enemies you will encounter in the future, but they also answer some of the lore questions you get during your journey.

Let me tell you more about the dialogue. Whatever expectations you had, lower them. Now lower them one more time and we should be good to go. The dialogue is a mixed bag. Sometimes it's alright (nothing incredible or deep really), but most of the time the dialogue reaches the mobile cash-grab games level and even dives into the cringe pot, especially when Styx is trying to be rebellious and edgy.

Other than that, there are cutscenes, which I would like to rate separately. They are incredible. The art, I mean. The dialogue still remains crappy. But the visuals of the cutscenes are the best thing in the game.

The story has one nice plot twist, but that's just it. It feels like the entire plot was supposed to spin around, but you just get bored after a while and want to finish the game faster, since the last 25% of the game's plot is highly predictable.



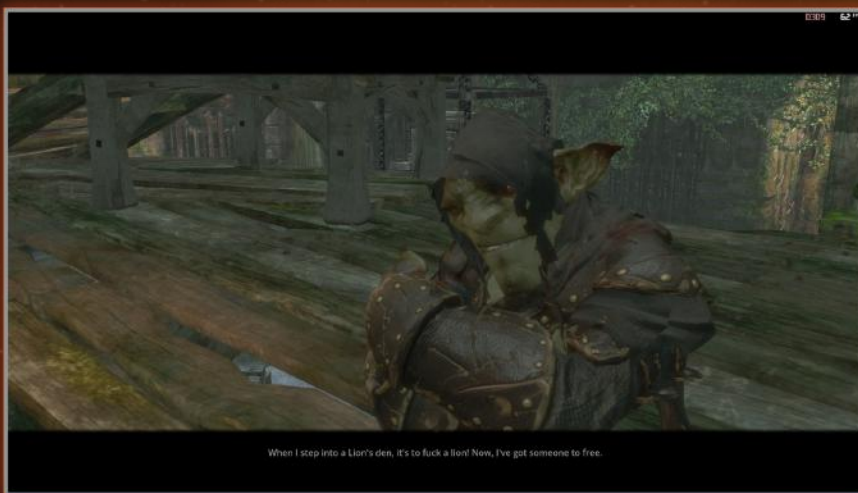
Gameplay

Now the most important part—after all, we're not playing stealth games for their story, right? The gameplay is alright, but there's this feeling of a lack of polish that haunts you at every step. Styx is not an assassin game, nor is it a kill-them-all game. It's a mix of both, and not a good one.

There are four difficulties in the game, and as there is no achievement to complete the game on Hard, I suggest you start on Normal just to get the hang of it. You can always change the difficulty in the settings mid-game. I, for instance, played on Hard, and it was a mistake. Even early on, it is difficult to get to know the environment. How far can Styx's footsteps be heard? How far can Styx jump? Only closer to the middle of the game did I find out that Styx jumps farther while not crouched.

This had caused me frustration early on, as I did not understand why the devs would include climbable objects that you fail to reach by just a few centimeters, causing you to fall flat to the ground. I had to improvise and use the other routes. Gladly, the maps are huge, and there's a lot of variety in the paths you can take. However, some paths have bottlenecks, which you have to take as there are no alternatives. The bottlenecks are, of course, well guarded. There is always at least one guard who stands still, and you cannot pass him without being noticed.

At this point, the devs introduce distractions, which I am not a fan of because they ruin the "being unnoticed" feeling in a stealth game. The simplest way to distract guards is to toss a ball (?) of sand at lit torches, which extinguishes them and alerts the guards to go check it out. Not all guards fall for it, because apparently there are certain guards who do not light up the torches once extinguished. What can you do if there are no torches around?



Well, you can look for a massive chandelier on the ceiling or perhaps lifted crates, which can be dropped and cause distraction. Alternatively, one of Styx's skills is to create clones, which can be used for various purposes, one of which is guard distraction. Another form of distraction, which is quite difficult and calls for pro skills, is props. There are chairs, buckets, and other props laying around that you can move by touching them. This creates noise, which the guards react to and investigate. More often not, you hit the props accidentally and ruin your perfect stealth run by alerting nearby guards.

There are doors that have to be lockpicked, but there's no minigame for it. You just hold E for 5 seconds and that's it. You can also cause some noise so that guards from the other side of the wall rush in and open the door for you.

The game has ragdolls, which is great fun sometimes, not because they are immersive but rather because they often break-twisted necks, limbs stuck in props and walls—it's fun, but surprising for 2014. The game runs on Unreal Engine 3, and I suppose the developers were simply unlucky to release a game on UE 3, half a year before UE 4 was released.

A big part of the gameplay is duels. You can avoid them if you are never noticed, but if you are, enemies rush toward you and lock you in duel mode. This forces the player's camera to focus on the enemy, and when you roll, Styx rolls around the duelist instead of rolling away in case the player tried to avoid any combat.

At this point, I had a lot of frustration, because if you are discovered and say, "Fck it, I'm going to rush through the enemies," some may catch you and force you to duel. You can escape the duel after a few rolling attempts, but while doing so, the other guards around you start hitting you as well. It gets even more annoying when some of the guards throw knives at you, not to mention the guards who one-hit kill you. What's the point of the dueling, then? It doesn't suit a stealth game, especially when Styx is focusing on the fact that you are playing a goblin, which are naturally shorter and weaker than humans, although swifter. However, that doesn't help you in fair combat whatsoever.

Styx offers a few upgrades called Skills, which bring a bit more variety to the gameplay.

You gain Skill Points by progressing through the main story and by completing side missions. Although some of the skills' usefulness is questionable. Gladly, interacting with the environment is fun and vivid.

Most of the time a stealth run ends when you come across a huge chandelier, which you can drop onto the enemy guards, and you just can't miss the opportunity to kill 5 guards with 1 drop BLOOD FOR THE GLOOD GOD!...

Sorry, force of habit.

When trying for a stealth run, be prepared that guards can hear you stab a person behind a few walls; the sound travel is based on distance, not obstacles, ambience, etc.



There are a few types of enemies. One of them is a mutated cockroach. Those creatures are blind, but not deaf. Alright, don't make any noise around them, and the problem is solved. But in reality... not only do they not react to other guards' movement sounds, they can also shoot precisely at you when you're in a chase and get on high ground. More of a scam than a cockroach, really.

There are many things about the gameplay that I wish I had known before starting to play. The game fails to teach you about them properly, which makes it a lot more frustrating to play.



Artificial Intelligence

It's cool that AI reacts to ambient noise such as a chair being moved, but to an extent... if guards see a prison cell door open, they just don't care. As a matter of fact, they can even go inside, have a look around, see a fresh dead body of a cellmate inside, and just go about minding their own business. Same goes with huge gates guarded by multiple enemies.

Whenever Styx opens the gates, nobody bats an eye. The AI is simplistic and has the memory of a goldfish since you can run behind a corner and the guards will most likely stop chasing you. However, I liked this part of the game because the game doesn't take it too seriously. You can run around and do random tactics, and if you are failing, hide or run away.

I have encountered no bugs, which wouldn't have been a feature. At some point, the game thought I was stuck while hiding underneath a table, so it decided to teleport me 10m away, but that only happened once during my 20-hour run.

Sound

The main menu soundtrack hits you with an aggressive violin, which you least expect in a stealth game. The soundtrack is not more than a minute long. But it sort of pushes you to action...in a stealth game.

As much as I didn't like the violin in the soundtrack, it reminded me of Project Zomboid. Therefore, I would give the game 2 stars out of 5 for it. Other than that, there's nothing special, interesting, or extraordinary in the ambience, voice-overs, or action sounds. It further made me realize that the game was rushed and not duly polished, or perhaps nobody in the dev team thought somebody would pay so much attention to sound in a stealth game, because... well, it should be a quiet game, right?

Another example would be the ringing sound as in tinnitus that persisted in the background in mission 3, as if Styx had partied in a club to loud music in mission 2. The devs certainly were creative about this, but there's an obvious reason nobody has implemented such a thing in games before.

Achievements

The game offers a standard set of achievements—nothing special and nothing for try-hards, sorry. The achievements include ones for the skills that you unlock, one missable story achievement, a few hidden ones, and some basic grind ones.

Styx has some of the typical stealth game achievements, which are; finding all the treasures and relics, finishing the game without being noticed or killing anyone, and maxing out the skills upgrades.

To be honest, I did not bother with the being unnoticed achievement, because there are more than a hundred enemies per map and rarely do they separate. All in all, there is no love or real challenge in the achievements; there are just the generic ones.

The relics give you more Skill Points, unlike treasures, which bear no value and makes it useless to collect them.



Graphics & Level Design

The environment and level design are fine, at least for a stealth game. There are no bright markings indicating what you can climb on, which could be highlighted with Amber vision if needed. What bugged me about the level design was that it made little sense. Sure, there are bridges over pits and rivers; that's perfectly logical.

But in some places, the devs didn't put much effort into putting everything together and just unloaded almost random bits that fit the environment, which are reused in different levels. You end up with passages leading nowhere, purposeless rooms, etc.

However, this enabled the devs to create huge levels, which are fun to explore, especially when there are many things you could interact with in the environment. Even though maps are huge, there are only a few of them; you get to play on each map at least twice, each time with new doors unlocked and the number of guards doubled.

The graphics are not bad. The variety and details in guard models pleasantly surprised me, but it's nothing special for 2014. There's a map that you can use to check the level and supposedly see where a relic is hidden, but the map is confusing and looks nothing like the real level. It is more like scraps put together, and it doesn't show the player's location on the minimap. I always failed to comprehend it clearly.

Fun meter

It's a fun mess that gets better if you pay attention, search every nook and cranny, listen to the guards' stories, and gather all the collectibles. But don't go in with any high expectations.

There are far better alternatives, such as Dishonored, so it makes me wonder why someone would bother with Styx because the story ain't something worth playing the game for, nor does the gameplay exceed other games.

Verdict

If you decide to give this game a try, I suggest you play on normal difficulty. I did my run on hard, and perhaps that was the source of my frustration. Anyhow, you can always spike the difficulty in the settings mid-game to hard or higher in case you feel the game plays too easy. Before you start, read a quick guide about the game's mechanics, as the game itself fails to teach you properly.

The game had a lot of potential, but it got wasted due to a lack of polish and a more understandable level design. Perhaps they fixed it all in a sequel?

■ Sir Packet Lossalot



STORY ★★☆☆☆
GRAPHICS ★★☆☆☆
GAMEPLAY ★★☆☆☆
SOUND ★★☆☆☆
FUN METER ★★★★★



- Nice artwork
- Lots of interaction with environment



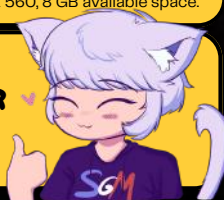
- Bad music choice
- Predictable, boring story
- Cringe dialogue

V
E
R
D
I
C
T

Genre: Action, Stealth
Developer: Cyanide Studio
Release Date: October 7, 2014

System Req: Intel Dual Core 2.4 GHz, 4 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 560, 8 GB available space.

YOU BETTER
STYX TO IT!

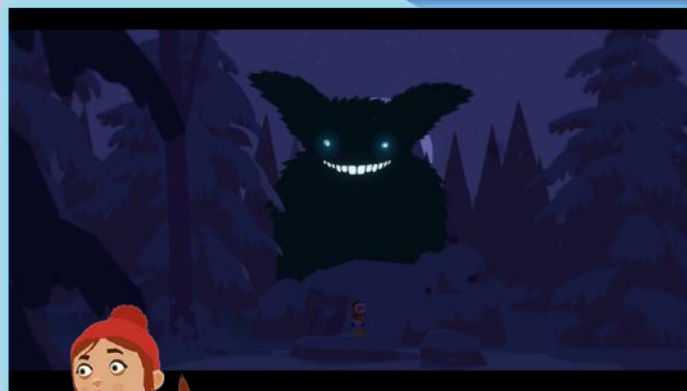


RÖKI

It is a wonderful thing to be reminded that so much of what seems important in games, in truth, doesn't really matter at all. So often, modern games bank all their hopes of success on convincing us that they've managed to do something bigger and bolder than ever – but somehow in the process, what we end up with repeatedly falls so far short of what came before. Many devs don't recognise the truth which Rōki, a point-and-click style adventure themed around Nordic folklore, encapsulates gloriously: if you know what you're doing, less is much, much more.

And so, we have a simplistic graphical style which could come right from the pages of a colourful children's book – yet just a few carefully chosen details give everything a powerful sense of vitality. It evocatively captures the wild magic of a snow-covered forest, or the antagonistic menace of a loitering raven. The characters in the story (human and otherworldly) manage to have so much charm and personality, with a depth of nuance to their designs in spite of the seemingly childish style. Likewise, the "Map" section of your journal, being just a series of connected circles representing each area within that chapter of the game, might at first seem too simple to be of any benefit. As you play, however, you come to realise that it is in fact very helpful, and highly practical too. Similarly, the "Notes" section, which could be mistaken for just sweetly illustrated flavour text, is actually a steady source of useful clues.

The audio production follows in the same vein of judicious efficiency. The soundtrack is almost without exception restrained and inobtrusive, but that doesn't stop it from typically being hugely atmospheric, and at times even strikingly poignant. The dialogue in the game is not voiced; aside from the main characters' names and one or two other words, the only sounds that will come from any of them are little more than grunts and mumbles. However, in this area too, they have managed to craft something greater than the sum of its parts. It sounds absurd, but at one point I really felt my heart in my throat because of the emotion conveyed in the specific tone the character used while saying, essentially, "Uh."



He's smiling! That's probably a good sign... Right?



I suppose it is fitting that they have taken this minimalist approach in service of creating a point-and-click game, a genre which has, mechanically at least, barely changed over the 40-odd years since its inception. Röki captures the joy and true spirit of adventure from the best of those early titles, but with polish and innovation to declare its own sense of identity. Most obviously, by virtue of there not in fact being any pointing or clicking! I admit, I could probably do without this change – it would be far smoother and more satisfying to interact using a mouse rather than just grabbing an inventory item with the enter key, then using WASD to fumble it into position.

Thankfully, I didn't need to struggle with this to an excessive degree because of another departure from most of the older titles: the puzzles actually make sense! I never needed to undertake the classic manoeuvre of trying to combine everything with everything else, because even in those cases where the solution eluded me for a while, it would organically present itself while I was going about my business getting other things done. Which is another welcome change from the norm – the game feels much more open than is typical of the genre, and a lot of the time you have multiple puzzles you can choose to tackle rather than being forced down a single, linear path. I found there to be a nice balance in the puzzles, on the whole – never too confusing or time-consuming, but at the same time not so basic as to feel pointless.

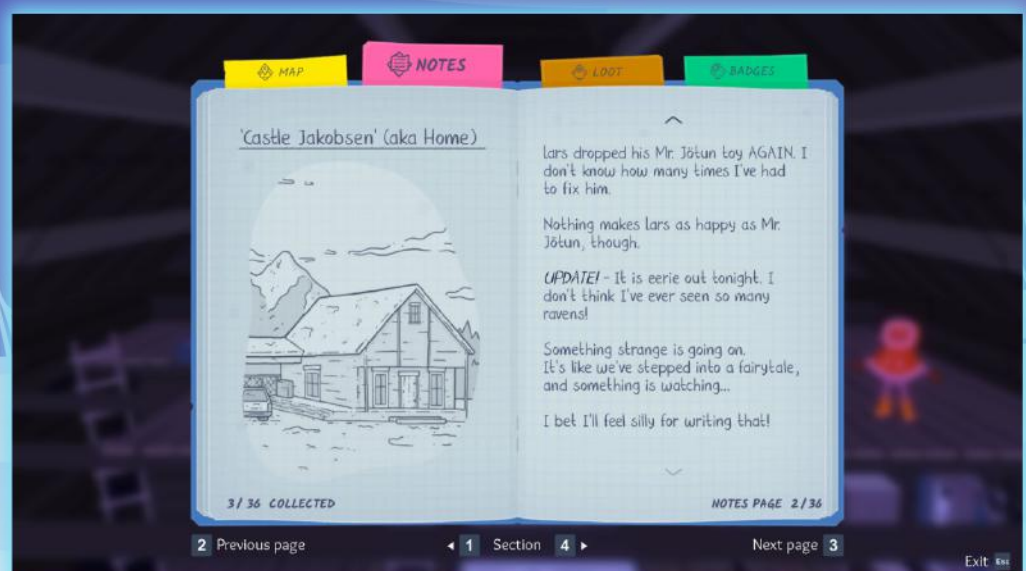
The tone of Röki is also a clear point of difference from many of the classics in the genre – for example, at one point you need some fertilizer, and you are standing next to an outhouse... And you DO NOT acquire the fertilizer from the outhouse. Clearly, these people have no idea what they are doing.



Um... Any chance I can just call you "Jo"?

Honestly, that kind of anything-goes wackiness would feel out of place with the understated visuals and audio, but that isn't to say that Röki takes itself too seriously. Most of the creatures you encounter on your journey are odd, endearing little guys. I'm no expert on Scandinavian mythology, but the eclectic selection of characters they included were fun and interesting, and come together to form a world that feels cohesive and rounded.

I couldn't help but draw parallels with Wytchwood (check out my review back in SGM #6!), which also has a picture-book aesthetic and includes many elements from classic fables and fairytales. However, where Wytchwood treats the darkness often found in morality tales with a playful, subversive attitude, Röki instead gracefully reminds us that the real world can be just as bleak and brutal as those stories – and that sometimes, devastatingly, life teaches us that lesson far too soon. Within minutes of starting the game, we learn that the lead character, a young girl named Tove, lost her mother some years ago.



Foreshadowing alert! Foreshadowing alert!

The game articulates the grief she and her father feel so effectively, with tiny details managing to paint such a vivid picture. Similarly, with subtle little touches, the game quickly builds an absolutely palpable sense of the responsibility that Tove has taken on in caring for her little brother, Lars. It is this protective instinct which provides an unwavering sense of determination, motivating every step you take along your quest. The emotions are presented in such an earnest and genuine way, but much like the visuals and audio, with a deft hand and never approaching melodrama. Where I found the fantasy elements of the story fun and engaging, I found the emotions driving it to be touching, compelling, and grounded in truth.

It feels like nitpicking, but I should point out that the minimalist style isn't an unmitigated success. One or two parts of the soundtrack are arguably too simple for their own good and feel repetitive, becoming a little annoying when you hear them too much. The simplicity of the character designs, although on the whole very effective, falls short in some attempts at expressing big emotions in the finale, potentially undercutting the sentiment of the climax. And those little grunts and mumbles, while at times absolutely masterful in their execution, at others completely miss the tone and pull you out of the moment. A more significant problem than any of these quibbles, though, is that some of the later puzzles involve too much back-and-forth, and really start to drag.

In one case, when climbing up and down a wall several times to solve a simple mirror puzzle, the climbing animation is slow enough to leave you feeling truly desperate to just get it over with. A little later, the final section of the game takes place in a large castle, and the game fades to black to load in a new section every time you go from one screen to the next. Even if you know precisely how to complete a puzzle, you will still often need to go back and forth many times, so trying to get things done can become a matter of "...run for 3 seconds – loading – run for 3 seconds – loading – run for 3 seconds – loading..." which easily could have turned me against the game.

However, despite these aspects certainly detracting from my experience, bringing them up almost seems like missing the point. Röki pulls together a smorgasbord of Nordic folklore elements, packages them in one of the most basic genres, and presents them in a naïve style – yet somehow smuggles in emotional heft and a grand, enchanting quest. Like classic Pixar, it manages to deliver bold, cinematic scope and fantastical adventure elements, while telling a story that feels intimate, personal, and genuine. Even if you're not a fan of point-and-click games, this one deserves your attention.

■ PsychoApeMan



Widow Drau

I don't usually eat human children. Troll food. Disgusting.

Fine then, next time YOU bring lunch!

STORY ★★★★★

GRAPHICS ★★★★★

GAMEPLAY ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

FUN METER ★★★★★



- Minimalist visual and audio style employed to powerful effect
- Heartfelt, compelling emotional drive to the story
- On the whole, really nicely crafted puzzles without convoluted solutions
- Interesting and fun Scandinavian folklore elements



- Annoyances appear near the end of the game, and might mean it overstays its welcome
- Mouse control would have been a much better option, especially when dealing with inventory items

V
E
R
D
I
C
T

Genre: Adventure, Puzzle
Developer: Polygon Treehouse
Release Date: July 23, 2020

System Req: AMD FX 6350, 4 GB RAM, Intel HD Graphics 4600, 5 GB available space.

A PLEASANT
POINT-AND-
CLICK NORDIC
ADVENTURE



ROLLERDROME

What do you get when you mix the fluid movement of Jet Set Radio, the trick challenges of the Tony Hawk Pro Skater series with a dash of guns, and the bullet-time mechanics popularized by The Matrix and Max Payne games? A bloody good time!

From British developers Roll7, known for their games such as the OlliOlli franchise, comes the new IP RollerDrome, a stylized 3rd person action sports arena shooter that harmoniously incorporates gunplay into roller skating like a PB & J sandwich... with guns!

The name RollerDrome instantly had me reminiscing over spending countless Friday nights at roller rinks and ice skating rinks with friends, rolling around to upbeat '80s music until we got tired and ordered hot dogs.

A DANGEROUS RollerDrome? That had me pondering about the widowmaking board track racing "motordromes" of yesteryear, which saw the bravest and most foolish donning overalls and riding early motorcycles as fast as they possibly dared go around croaky wooden tracks.

Drawing clear inspiration from the wordplay of the name to the clothing and helmets worn by motordrome racers, RollerDrome sets a tone and feeling of danger that persists throughout the experience.



First Impressions

After a vague and brief introduction of what the Rollerdrome is and a cutscene of a roller rink being watched from a looming spectator box above, you assume the role of an unnamed competitor about to attempt their qualifying round.

The game then gives you control of this competitor in 3rd person, and you play out the qualifying round which serves as the game's tutorial. It teaches you the basic mechanics and controls of Rollerdrome through the game's narrative in a refreshingly interactive way, simplified for you to pick up movement and tricks fast, becoming second nature while you focus on lining up shots.

Rollerdrome then puts you in a locker room during a first-person story segment in which you assume the role of Kara Hassan and are let free to explore. You're introduced to the history of the mysterious bloodsport of Rollerdrome, a brief backstory of your character, and the demeanor of other competitors through newspaper clippings, signs, notes left by others, and an ominous radio spectating the sport.

Initially, you aren't shown or told about how you ended up here or why Kara chose to join the Rollerdrome; what is known is that Kara is a fresh face and an up-and-coming talent with a lot expected of her.



Story

Set in the year 2030, the world is in shambles and on the verge of becoming a violent, privatized dystopia. Megacorporations act as the government and silently control the media, blurring the lines between reality, fact, and conspiracy with their influence.

Amongst the civil unrest and confusion, a new bloodsport was popularized: Rollerdrome, a championship held in roller rinks that outfits willing competitors with guns and pits them against the equally if not more heavily armed "House Players", weaponized robots, and eventually teleporting house players, to name but a few.

Created by the same corporation, Matterhorn, that controls the media and military, Rollerdrome started as a way for Matterhorn to control the masses, keeping them preoccupied and entertained by this brutally rousing combat sport of skill so they could privately sell the militarized robots they use in the Rollerdrome.

With the Rollerdrome championships glamourized to the extent that violence became an everyday occurrence for the population, the most popular veteran competitors are seen as celebrities, idolized by children and adults alike. With a rising population and a shortage of jobs, the poor and optionless found themselves turning to the Rollerdrome, fighting for their lives with the promise of fame and fortune.

Rollerdrome tells the story of Kara Hassan in her journey through the Rollerdrome championships, uncovering conspiracies initially unbeknownst to her and learning of the struggle between the Matterhorn corporation, silently pulling social and economic strings behind the scenes, and The New Action Army, an anti-corporate group based heavily on late 1960s counterculture.





Gameplay

Rollerdrome is a zen experience fuelled by energetic synth-filled '80s beats that slowly crank the gameplay up to sadistic levels as you progress the game and unlock new guns. The game's levels are portrayed like a sporting event with qualifiers, semi-finals, finals, etc.

At its core, doing tricks replenishes your ammo, perfect dodges freeze time, and kills fill up your meter, allowing you to slow time. Gameplay asks you to learn to balance the 3 in a gun-blazing ballet.

Each level presents a list of challenges to complete in order to progress to the next round, such as beating another player's high score, performing a certain trick over a specific gap, or taking down an enemy with a certain weapon. Which of these challenges you choose to do with which guns is entirely up to you, leaving room for experimentation and replayability on every level. Despite the game's accessibility, challenges such as completing a level in 1 single stylish combo or performing every type of grind or grab trick in a single run negs on completionists and those looking to master the game for achievements and bragging rights.

Controls

Rollerdrome employs easy-to-pick-up but hard-to-master controls similar to Jet Set Radio and the Tony Hawk Pro Skater series, but with de-emphasized tricks to facilitate the addition of simple and tight gunplay controls.

Although completely playable with both a controller and keyboard and mouse, I found myself using a controller 95% of the time and found it a lot more fluid and easier to connect combos between slo-mo shots and dodges using a controller.





Art Style

Rollerdrome dons a very considered silky cel-shaded art style of warm and neutral tones with emphasized thick black lines in an almost pastel cartoony fashion. Vivid contrasting colours such as red, green and, blue are used for dangers such as incoming missiles, mines on the ground, or a spray of acid, which greatly helps visibility to avoid taking damage during intense, fast-paced action sequences.

With a wardrobe evocative of 1900s motordrome motorcycle racer's overalls and Speed Racer's helmet, RollerDrome's classic vintage style permeates from the outfit choices to the colours used on the wooden flooring of the roller rinks you zip your way through. Kara Hassan's iconic red jumpsuit, neon orange wheels, and white helmet with 2 red stripes feel almost like a calculated part of her character.

Conclusion

Rollerdrome presents a fresh take on a very niche and rarely seen genre, making it accessible and enjoyable for new and old fans alike.

With an endearing yet vintage art style, fitting music that hypes you up for just one more run, and gameplay as satisfying and scary as trying to pull off a band-aid in one pull...

Rollerdrome does what it aims to do and brings together varying elements in a smooth and satisfying way without any boring fillers or obvious annoyances. It doesn't redefine the genre, but it sure does reignite its spark!

BabyOilonICE



STORY	★★★★☆☆
GRAPHICS	★★★★☆☆
GAMEPLAY	★★★★☆☆
SOUND	★★★★☆☆
FUN METER	★★★★☆☆



- Great art style and music that captures an era
- A fresh take on a rare genre made for fans and newcomers alike
- Satisfying and fluid gameplay without any boring filler



- The game is rather short (10-15 hours), relying heavily on replayability and experimentation
- No Anti-Aliasing option on PC making the thick cel-shaded outlines very jagged
- The game is rather expensive for the amount of content (Reasonably priced on sale)

VERDICT

Genre: Action, Sports
Developer: Roll7
Release Date: August 16, 2022

System Req: Intel Core i3-610,
4 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX
560 Ti, 10 GB available space.

A GOOD
GAME TO
ROLL INTO



The title of the game defines its very core: it is a simulation. It's designed as a card game, where the order and combinations of the cards are associated with different results, and played on a board with up to hundreds of cards the player can interact with. Actions can be performed by adding cards to "verbs" which as a result destroy them, change them or create new cards. These verbs are represented on the table as tiles with distinctive pictures. They are either manual, where the player is adding the cards to do certain actions, or automatic, which simulate actions not being controlled by the player. This sums up the core mechanics of the game, rendering it a really simple tabletop game.





A Case Most Peculiar

To make the progression through this simulation rewarding, the game has goals and endings, while multiple recurring game over conditions should be avoided as well. It features some interesting minor victories to experience that have their own achievements, but are not proper endings compared to the normal victories. Three possible endings can be seen depending on a certain card the player creates in the early phase of the game that sets the path of the game in a certain direction.

According to HowLongToBeat, it takes around 19 hours to finish the game, while a victory can be achieved within an hour. The reason is the time-consuming process of exploring the possibilities of the game. It doesn't have tutorials, nor does it tell about the victory conditions. The player is forced to make educated guesses as to how to progress. This trial-and-error gameplay in multiple playthroughs is what pushes the player towards their first successful victory.

The game doesn't have a story, but it does have a compelling narrative that can be read throughout the game. Verbs with the matching cards show short mood-setting quotations or events happening during the gameplay. It can be seen as a type of story.



Technical Notions

The UI of the game is a bit of a mess in its current state and it will hardly be fixed at this point. Newly generated cards are just dropped on the first available spot on the table, even if there was a card there that is in use with a different verb and would have been relocated to its previous position after its action is finished. In short, the cards will always be relocated after being used, or they might overlap in their new positions. It's possible to manually allocate the cards on the table, while new cards will only appear in a single row. Because of the problematic UI, new cards can appear outside the screen. These are usually done by automatic verbs that cause either a permanent negative effect or progress the game to one of the game over conditions.

The game has random lags where it stops for a second and drops the card the player is holding with the cursor, or doesn't properly recognize the card that is double-clicked and closes the window, yes, the same window where they were preparing a verb and have to start over. Pausing the game to do these actions is always an option and doesn't ruin the gameplay, yet it can be quite annoying to repeat the same action multiple times until successful.

The graphical options are somewhat redundant. It does have windowed and fullscreen borderless options, with resolutions between 480p and 1080p. The beauty slider has three possible settings: Acceptable, Admirable and Glorious. While playing with different settings on the slider, I failed to see a significant difference in either performance or graphics. No other graphical settings are available for the game.



Antecedent Sounds

The music perfectly matches the style of the game, creating the feeling of mystery and tension. The OST is available for purchase on Steam, or you can just run the game in the background and listen to its ambient music. Settings for sounds also lack options; there are two sliders, one for sounds and one for the music.

After finishing a game, there are three legacies offered to the player, which are the backstory for a starting character with slight differences in the starting cards. One of the three legacies is related to the ending of the last game. If the last game ended fulfilling a major victory condition, a New Game+ legacy is offered, where some of the cards used in the last game remain. The game offers four Standard and three New Game+ legacies. Four additional legacies can be purchased in separate DLCs and two more were announced by the developers but never released before shifting to a different project. The gameplay and endgame conditions are different in these DLCs. They offer some replayability if you are willing to pay.



Over the Walls of the Mansus

This is where the developer-made content ends. They are actively working on their current project, BOOK OF HOURS, a different card game in the same universe. They are still patching Cultist Simulator as well.

The rest is what the community creates. There are a number of mods that are available on Steam Workshop and external sites, like Nexus Mods. Some of these mods require certain DLCs to operate. Some mods aim to solve the problem mentioned in the UI section. For example, the mod "Shelves" creates multiple pockets for certain types of cards and puts them there after hitting the Autosort key. There are several mods aiming to give new legacies, and even completely different gameplay experiences.

Sometimes the game requires tedious gameplay, but overall it is fun for dozens of hours. It also has enough replay value with several official and community created content.

■ juhaszandor

STORY ★★★★★

GRAPHICS ★★★★★

GAMEPLAY ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

FUN METER ★★★★★



- Great atmosphere
- Mod support
- Replayability



- Performance issues
- Slow paced

V
E
R
D
I
C
T



Cat Caro,
a Seer



Health



A Wood-
Whisper



Funds



A Collection
of Poetry



Noonstone



Kühner
and Gerth



Leathy

Genre: Card Game, Management
Developer: Weather Factory
Release Date: May 31, 2021

System Req: Intel Pentium 4
2.00GHz, 1 GB RAM, ATI FireGL
T2-128, 500 MB available space.

RUNNING A
CULT HAS
NEVER BEEN
THIS GREAT



INTRO

It's a good thing that, before signing the standard SGM contract (in my own blood, naturally), I swore to uphold the highest standards of journalistic integrity. If not for that pledge, I might be swayed by the fact that the subject of this review repeatedly tried to win me over with compliments, even going so far as to occasionally describe my gaming as "Smokin' Sexy Style" — that kind of sweet talk could win some favour with a lesser reviewer. Having said that, I also frequently saw the dismissive criticism of my technique as being "Dismal". If I weren't so principled, I might take offence and allow that to be reflected in my rigorously impartial analysis of this pathetic, tiresome garbage.

I'm kidding, but there may be a grain of truth in there; before starting to play, I was of course aware of the lofty, towering skill ceiling of Devil May Cry games, and was absolutely convinced that I could never hope to ascend to anywhere near those heady heights. The balletic ballistics and clever cleaving on display in countless YouTube videos would seem to require a level of commitment which, if not quite impossible, would seem wildly impractical. It was hard for me not to imagine that the mentality and sheer manhours required to reach that state would have an extremely high correlation with family members tentatively approaching you and trying not to sound deeply concerned as they ask, "How are things going? You doing OK, buddy?"

Yet at the same time, I was anxious that without the fanatical devotion needed to master the game, how deep could my enjoyment really be, and would my review accurately reflect everything the game had to offer? In other words, if I didn't git gud enough to git all the gud out of the game that my gitting gud cud git me, wud the game git the review it shud?



NO RESTRAINT, NO MERCY

As it turned out, those concerns actually weren't that far off the mark. The game is far more complex than any previous entry in the series; the developers at Capcom had a plethora of ideas and seem to have just thrown everything in. You jump back and forth between 3 different characters, each with very distinct playstyles, movesets, and combat mechanics. Beyond that, they each have multiple weapons and dozens of attacks, which vastly increase in number as you progress through the game. All of these aspects are intended to interact with each other to provide a dazzling array of possibilities.

I have played many games which included comparable complex, interwoven systems, and which had varying levels of success at incrementally building my understanding and capability. I have never played a game which had so much going on and yet seemed to care so little about the extent to which I had understood or truly mastered any of it. It was especially frustrating because I would have loved to dig deep into the mechanics of one character to get a solid handle on them – but instead, on multiple occasions, just when I was really building confidence with one, the game would force me to stop using them and shove me into the shoes of one of the others, to awkwardly start the cycle again.

I'm sure if I made these kinds of comments on Reddit or the Steam discussion boards, there would be lulling aplenty at what a cuck loser I am that I can't even conduct a PhD-level research project to figure out how to play the game optimally. The fact is, though, that far from making design decisions which could easily alleviate these issues, there are multiple examples which manage to make them even worse. Some of them are incredibly odd to me, and I just can't think of any other game to which I could compare them.



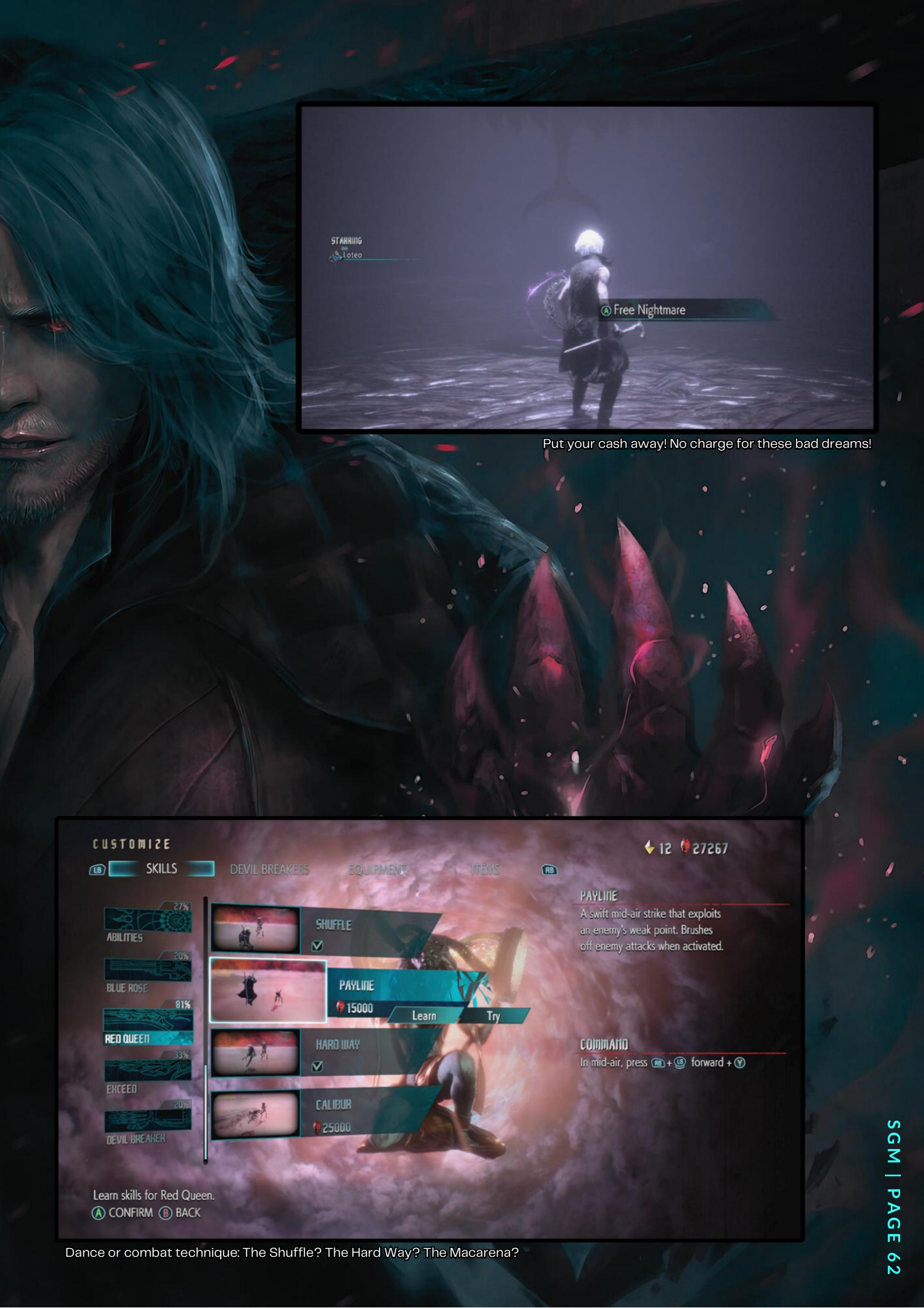
A demon with a shotgun is pretty dismal for your mental health.

THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

For example: you buy an upgrade to unlock 6 new melee attacks for Dante, and the game just lists their names. That's all it gives you. You need to enter practice mode, open the move list, and find your new attacks (if you can remember their names) for the game to show you the necessary context and button inputs for each attack. Only then, after you successfully perform them and discover what they actually do, can you try to decide how you might combine them with the rest of your arsenal. The thought process behind that kind of opaque and unhelpful interaction blows my mind slightly. And not just this – it's like they have taken for granted that they can do the absolute bare minimum in terms of guiding you through a host of game mechanics, with the assumption that TrueGamers™ will be devoted enough to make up for their negligence.

Speaking of the move list, that was another area in which I found an unnecessary lack of clarity. Similar to the previously mentioned issue, either you figure it out through trial and error or look outside of the game to find a decent explanation. OK, if you're trying to be poetic in a second language, I appreciate that you may end up with some names which seem rather silly, if not entirely random, and typically with no coherent connection to the move itself. But I don't understand why the instructions couldn't be more consistent and less vague at times. If I'm already struggling at the sheer volume of moves available, it isn't enormously helpful to read that to perform "Pestilent Yodel" I must press Y then YY then tap Y, whereas to perform "Unholy Handbag" I need to press YY then Y then repeatedly tap Y. Is no one at Capcom aware that computer games are a moving, visual medium, and it's possible to demonstrate the intended timing rather than give an approximate description? Genuinely, the instructions for one move simply read "Hold X for as long as possible". As long as possible? I have things to do at the weekend; is there any chance we can narrow that down a little?

As a result of failures like this to give clear explanations or to gradually develop my skillset, even at the end of the game, there were aspects which I still felt I only vaguely understood and could only clumsily, inconsistently engage with. As if to rub salt into the wound, in another wild design decision, the second half of the *final* fight of the game is interrupted not once but twice by (unclear) tutorial screens, as two new combat elements are unlocked! It's like in the closing moments, before you even get the satisfaction of completing the game, it tells you with a smirk, "You thought you were overwhelmed before? You've never even seen this stuff before! You thought you'd beaten the game? This isn't really the end! You're supposed to start again now so you can try to figure out these new toys!" I guess some people probably enjoyed this reveal, but for me it totally undermined the climax, while also underscoring how little thought had been put into the introduction and explanation of game mechanics.



Put your cash away! No charge for these bad dreams!

CUSTOMIZE

LB SKILLS DEVIL BREAKERS EQUIPMENT ITEMS RB

27% ABILITIES

20% BLUE ROSE

81% RED QUEEN

33% EXCEED

20% DEVIL BREAKER

SHUFFLE

PAYLINE

HARD WAY

CALIBUR

15000

25000

Learn Try

PAYLINE

A swift mid-air strike that exploits an enemy's weak point. Brushes off enemy attacks when activated.

COMMAND

In mid-air, press RB + LB forward + Y

Learn skills for Red Queen.

A CONFIRM B BACK

Dance or combat technique: The Shuffle? The Hard Way? The Macarena?

NO "I" IN "TEAM"?

Despite my frustration at the game's lacklustre efforts to teach you how to play, one aspect which I did get my head around was the "multiplayer" functions. Note my clever use of speech marks there, a universally recognised indicator of "sweet mama is it a stretch to use this description unironically". It's worth specifying that I got my head around it because, almost without exception, when I see the system mentioned in reviews, people do not understand what the hell is going on. To be clear, I do not blame them – compared to the extent that the multiplayer system is (un)clarified, the other game mechanics are given positively encyclopaedic explanations. How it works, in practice, is this: occasionally a message will appear telling you something along the lines of "STARRING: xXxPureHardcoreBoixXx". Then, at the end of the level, the game will ask you whether the performance of "xXxPureHardcoreBoixXx" deserves a stylish rank (earning them a free "continue" orb), or no rank at all. And that, almost always, is all there is to it.

You might be thinking, "But surely, if the game asks you to rank their performance, that must mean that you encountered them during the level?" No. No, it does not. The overwhelming majority of the time, at least; on all but 2 levels, it is literally impossible to directly encounter the person who is "starring" in it. The most you can usually hope for is that, if you happen to get to the right vantage point at the right time (and – almost miraculously – to not be very much occupied with combat of your own), then you can stop your progress and witness a display of their prowess... As some tiny figure, way off in the distance. And usually only for a matter of seconds. Still, though, that might be fun, to witness in real-time as someone struggles or excels against all the challenges the game throws at you...? Well, there's a catch there, too – on the vast majority of these occasions when the player is "simultaneously" playing through the level on the other side of the invisible wall, you are in fact watching... a recording! As if to hammer this point home, I was repeatedly presented with a dazzling display from the notorious expert at the game... Me. And no, I was unfortunately not allowed to give myself any ranking.

As for the exceptions that I mentioned, then: there are 2 levels on which, if the "STARRING" player enters a specific arena at the same precise time while you are in there... You will be there together! Close enough to actually see them properly! They will fight alongside you! Unless either of you pauses the game. Then they will disappear. But I tell you, if I had to come up with a word to describe those 7 seconds of collaborative demon crushing, it would have to be... "Meh". On balance, with no hyperbole whatsoever, I'd have to say it's the most half-arsed, inept, ill-conceived attempt at implementing multiplayer that I can recall ever having come across. Its inclusion was utterly, utterly pointless.



Classic melee options: sword, nunchuks, demonic motorbike...



Starring: PsychoApeMan. That guy sounds awesome! And looks... dinky!



DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

Now, bear with me for a moment. I realise that, up to this point, it must seem that I have an enormously negative view of the game. So here comes the big twist, I guess – despite all I've said above, it is clear to me that the mechanics and systems buried beneath all that clumsy, unintended obfuscation are world-class. Even with my frustration at how it was all conveyed, when I found moments of flow, it was sublime. The fact that so diverse a range of actions can intertwine with such dynamic fluidity is magnificent, and in terms of visuals, combat is truly spectacular. In both cases, from my experience, they represent a high point in a series which was already renowned for doing those things so well. It's precisely because the systems are beautifully crafted that I was so annoyed at how they are delivered – it's much more disappointing when someone overcooks a steak than a hot dog.

The gorgeous aesthetics of the character animations are equalled by the environments in the early game; you navigate through a demon-infested city, very clearly heavily inspired by London, and I absolutely loved every second of it. Indeed, I frequently found myself wanting to stop and just take it all in; it really does look magnificent. Unfortunately, I felt these sections were underutilised, and all too soon you progress beyond the city and spend the rest of the game ascending a gargantuan demonic tree-thing. These environments are dull, with a generic style and a limited, washed-out palette to match. They are so indistinct that it is very easy to lose your bearings, and frankly, they held no appeal at all to me.

It feels really out of place to me that the game would have these uninspiring environments, because aside from them, the entire tone is joyfully bombastic and over-the-top. The soundtrack is precisely what you want from DMC: driving and frantic, full of screams and growls, and fitting the action perfectly. The story is equally wild, and I frequently found myself grinning inanely at the abject insanity and ludicrous melodrama that regularly feature. It would be easy for story beats and characterisations this broad to grate, but that was almost never the case for me.



Hey kiddo, want some candies?



Fighting in the library, and scissors beat paper... Thankfully, I rock.



Not-quite-London bridge is well and truly falling down

THREE'S A CROWD

You play through the game switching between 3 different player characters: Dante, Nero, and newcomer V. Dante is a grizzled, cynical old badass with whom you have 4 distinct play styles to toggle between and an impressive host of melee and projectile weapons which you can flip back and forth with on the fly. Nero is a surly young one-armed upstart with a variety of robotic prosthetics that transform combat in unique and interesting ways, but can only be strategically used to their highest potential and replaced by alternatives a handful of times throughout each level. Finally, V is a pasty, poetry-loving goth, too fragile to directly get involved with combat for the most part. Instead, he depends on summoning 3 demonic familiars to fight for him, which resemble a large raven, a panther-like beast, and a hulking rock golem monstrosity. I said before that the characterisations in the game didn't generally grate on me, but the most common exception was V's avian familiar: he almost exclusively communicates in try-hard wisecracks, and he came to remind me of Jafar's sidekick parrot in the Aladdin cartoon. I can tell you, an edgelord Iago did not enhance my enjoyment of the game at all.

Among the old school DMC fanbase online, V receives a lot of hate – not for his beaked buddy, but for his playstyle seeming out of place. I don't feel anything like the vitriol that I see from many players, but it's unmistakable that he lacks the panache and dynamism of the other 2 characters' playstyles, and even with my level of ability, I could see that he doesn't have anything like their depth and flexibility. For me, though, following the point I mentioned earlier in the review, my biggest problem with V was that every time I was forced to play as him, it was at the expense of the level of familiarity I had built up with one of the more complex characters.

Grand caricatures that they are, the three fit neatly in stereotypical tropes, which isn't intended as a criticism; I don't need them to be beacons of originality and fresh ideas to enjoy their drama. Their cliched personality quirks made me picture them as being some stage-managed, PR-fabricated boyband trio, although I suppose they don't exactly fit that mould... I'm sure there are many groups that would consider some spin on "the frail intellectual one" and "the angry rebellious one", but throwing them together with "the middle-aged one who has clearly seen some shit and looks like he definitely has substance abuse problems" is probably not a typical combination.

The only side character of any real note is Nico, the engineering genius behind Nero's arsenal of arms, with a thick southern US accent and a sassy personality. She brings some pleasing levity to contrast the occasionally po-faced attitudes of the protagonist trio, and has a fun, rounded personality – which certainly can't be said for the other 2 women in the game. In an undisguised and unrefined attempt at fan service, Trish and Lady are dropped in as returning characters from previous entries in the series. Not featured as playable characters or allowed to provide any meaningful contribution in any way – both of them are in the game for the sole purpose of each flashing their arse on a single occasion, then doing nothing whatsoever. It's not like I have some great affinity with either of them based on their previous inclusion in the franchise – but still, it really didn't sit well with me how the game so obviously exploited them for lazy titillation and nothing else.

DISMAL? BADASS? SAVAGE?

It is hard for me to give a pithy summary of my feelings about the game because, as should be clear, I am somewhat conflicted. I really don't think it's acceptable for a game to do such a poor job explaining core mechanics. I wholeheartedly believe that the game should incorporate a framework to organically drill combat movesets into you, and increase complexity layer by layer rather than thoughtlessly dumping everything on you all at once. I don't think it's good enough for a player to be required to look outside of the game itself and practice outside of the story mode in order to have a hope of feeling like they have the fundamentals covered.

And yet... There's magic here. There's cathartic, freewheeling, creative carnage by the bucketload, and when everything falls into place, it is probably in a purer form than any other game out there. I would recommend it, but only with the caveat that there is perhaps no better example of a game which expects a lot from you, and only shines if you are willing to make the effort to go well beyond meeting it halfway.

SGM | PAGE 68

■ PsychoApeMan

STORY ★★★★★☆

GRAPHICS ★★★★★★

GAMEPLAY ★★★★★☆

SOUND ★★★★★☆

FUN METER ★★★★★☆



- Stunning early environments
- Gorgeous, fluid character animations
- Satisfying, flowing, thoughtful and varied combat – if you can figure it out
- Enormous scope for developing your skills



V
E
R
D
I
C
T

- Aside from the early game, environments and levels layouts are enormously bland and dull
- Poor attempt at explaining various game mechanics
- Very questionable design decisions about introducing skills and organically developing your skillset
- Laughable “multiplayer” element wasn't worth including

Genre: Action, Hack & Slash
Developer: Capcom
Release Date: March 8, 2019

System Req: Intel® Core™ i7-3770, 8 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1060, 35 GB available space.



Dante responds to my criticisms of the game.

COULD'VE
BEEN GREAT,
BUT THE
DEVIL'S IN THE
DETAILS



CHRONO TRIGGER®

First beating the game as a youngin', Chrono Trigger solidified itself in my mind as one of the greatest RPGs of all time. Why, for over 20 years, have I accepted this and will echo this sentiment without a second thought? At its core, it's like any other RPG of the time – You've a party of heroes who battle monsters in an attempt to save the world.

Wake up Chrono, it's 1000 AD, and you've a fair to attend!

Your adventure begins with Chrono heading to the town fair, where you bump into a young girl called Marle. This is the first time (and one of many) Chrono Trigger sets itself apart from other RPGs. Rather than throwing you headfirst into the story as is popular with many games, the festival lets you enjoy a variety of minigames for as long as you wish.



Bumping into Marle



This is also the second time the game sets itself apart from others, as the actions you take during the opening moments of the game determine how future aspects of the story play out. From here, you meet Lucca, a childhood friend who has a new invention to show you. Suddenly, the tone of the game shifts – The lighthearted experience is gone.

Unfortunately, things don't go to plan, as Marle is transported into the past. Being the hero that he is, Chrono chases after her. Slowly, the tone of the story is set – The end of the world is coming! In 1999, the day of Lavos will come, where the deadly creature will rise from the earth and destroy the world.

The true highlight of the story lies with the NPCs, which is a weird statement to read, I know, but hear me out. As you progress through the story, the actions you take throughout your journey will impact how the NPCs act and react, offering engaging dialogue throughout. With 12 possible endings, how you save the world will be determined by the actions you take from start to finish.

The Battle System is a perfect example of simple, yet deep, without being complex

Chrono Trigger excels when it comes to combat. At first glance, it's simple – You choose between attack, tech (magic), or item. However, thanks to how movement and techs work during battles, there is an added layer of depth without unnecessary complexity

Battles are not static and see both you and the enemies constantly moving around the battlefield. When I say battlefield, I mean the world, as there are no RNG encounters – What you see is what you get. The way this movement impacts tech choice during combat is brilliant.

Techs come in the form of single target and area of effect (AOE). Now, AOE abilities can target everyone, a smaller area, or other conditions (such as a straight line in front of the caster). In addition, there are double and triple attacks. Experimenting with different party members is encouraged, as they all have different combos.

Further, enemy attacks can reposition your characters, or combo with other enemies (some even counterattack if they are nearby the monsters you attack). As you and your enemies are constantly moving, tech choice is important, and has you thinking about your choices much more than just spamming your most powerful abilities. Do you wait for enemies to move in place so you can hit more with your AOE, or do you play it safe to avoid counter attacks?

This is a perfect example of how to introduce simple systems in a game without them becoming stale as you progress. Engaged is an understatement, as I found myself thinking about my actions much more than I expected. In addition, there was no grinding necessary, which is yet another way Chrono Trigger sets itself apart from other RPGs.



The cast you'll be experimenting with



Surrounded by enemies, Chrono contemplates his next move

My ears were taken back to a happier time

When it comes to soundtracks, Square (Square Enix, or Square Soft) deliver time and time again. Composers Nobuo Uematsu and Yasunori Mitsuda excelled with Chrono Trigger, delivering what I would consider one of the best soundtracks in gaming history. Listening back to the music now, over 20 years later, and I am taken back to a happier time – All the emotions I felt as a child came rushing back.

Iconic is the first word which comes to mind when I think of the soundtrack. Each piece perfectly suits the atmosphere, captures the mood, and matches the time in the game. The best (and simplest) example I can give is the title screen. A pendulum swings, accompanied by the sound of a clock ticking. An obvious reference to the importance time plays in the game. Slowly, a simple melody is introduced before there is nothing but silence. It's simple, it's powerful, it's brilliant.

Visually, it has stood the test of time – No pun intended

First things first, I despised the HD graphics, and my entire journey was set to the original graphics. The HD setting was unnecessarily smooth and took away much of the charm of the original. I'd also argue that a simple filter isn't enough to justify the title of 'HD', but here we are - Welcome to modern gaming.

No longer are we stuck in the medieval era typical of the time, now we can go back in time, or into the distant future thanks to the time travel mechanic – The world is alive! Characters are lively and their emotions are visible, enemies are animated and frantic, bosses look and feel threatening. Techs look and feel powerful during combat. Everything gels together brilliantly.

For a 2D game, Chrono Trigger delivers in all aspects of the graphics department. Great care was taken to craft everything, not only to create an engaging world, but to deliver a story using all mediums available. No moment better captures this than the campfire scene.

All the characters gather around a fire, the glow of the fire lighting up the surrounding grass and trees. To avoid spoiling anything, I won't delve into the details, but you can see and feel the emotions the characters are feeling. Several themes are explored, several are reiterated. This is just one of many moments in the game which will make you stop and take everything in.

Closing thoughts

What can I say? I loved Chrono Trigger when I first played it, and I still love it now. With age has come wisdom, and a deeper sense of curiosity – The question of “why do I consider it the greatest RPGs of all time” can finally be answered. Playing again, I can say with confidence, these thoughts were justified. Chrono Trigger is one of the most perfectly crafted RPG adventures I have experienced in a long, long time, both from a story and gameplay perspective. I cannot say everything I’d like to as we’d be here all day (and approaching spoiler territory), but this is a must play for all RPG lovers.

■ **BAEuro**

SGM | PAGE 71



Flying high, above the clouds

STORY	★★★★★
GRAPHICS	★★★★★
MEPLAY	★★★★★
SOUND	★★★★★
IN METER	★★★★★



- Can be beaten as early or late as you wish
- Additional content since the original SNES release
- Combat is engaging, outshining many modern titles
- Story is long enough to feel rewarding, while short enough to not drag on longer than desired

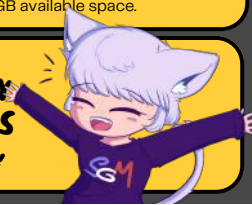
- Controls were poor on keyboard, so I suggest using a controller
- HD graphics weren't too my tastes as they took away the charm of the original, this may not apply if you're playing for the first time

VERDICT

Genre: JRPG, Fantasy
Developer: Square Enix
Release Date: February 27, 2018
Original Release Date: March 11, 1995

System Req: Intel Core i3 2.3GH,
2 GB RAM, Intel HD Graphics 530,
2 GB available space.

**A TRULY
TIMELESS
CLASSIC.**



DETROIT

B E C O M E H U M A N

"You look human..."

One of my favourite classes when I was in high school was philosophy. The history part might not have been the most thrilling, but I was lucky enough to have a teacher who, aside from the history, would ask us questions that really made us think, sparked healthy debates in class, and made us wonder things we wouldn't have otherwise. In one of these classes, she made groups and asked us a question to discuss among ourselves: "What makes us human? If we were to create a robot that looks like us, thinks like us, and whose brain worked exactly like ours, would it be human?". Back then, something inside me told me that, no, it couldn't be human. It was a robot. But I couldn't explain why it wasn't human. Eventually, given that I didn't have any real arguments aside from what my gut told me, I had to accept that maybe that hypothetical robot could be considered human. But ever since then and to this day, I have been wondering: would the similarity to humans make it human? Or does humanity lie somewhere else in us?

I'm really struggling to come to terms with the fact that I will definitely not be able to convey all of my thoughts about Detroit: Become Human in this review. I know this might sound overdramatic, as many have been quick to dismiss DBH as just another one of David Cage's pretentious attempts at reinventing the narrative genre in video games or something (and... it kind of is), but the game has been really interesting to me ever since it came out like five years ago. I really enjoy narrative games, and this one is incredibly complex, if only for the number of things it's trying to convey at the same time.





It's the year 2038. The advance of technology has reached a new milestone with the creation of androids, robots able to imitate humans in every possible way to serve humanity in their every need and want. However, tensions among humans and androids are high, as the latter have been causing unemployment rates to skyrocket. Also, the so-called "deviants" (defective androids with the apparent ability to simulate thoughts and feelings) have been spreading, causing the humans to feel unsafe around their androids. In this scenario, we will follow the stories of three different androids: Connor, a detective sent by the android manufacturer to help investigate the deviancy cases; Markus, a deviant who once had everything but, upon losing it all, might end up leading the androids into the machine uprising; and Kara, a deviant who is desperately trying to find a safe place for herself and a child.

...sound human...

Detroit: Become Human is no different from other Quantic Dream games like *Beyond: Two Souls* and *Heavy Rain*, gameplay-wise. It's a fully narrative experience that feels more like a very long cutscene you interact with sometimes rather than a game. But, despite the not very thrilling gameplay, this one features major improvements when compared to the studio's prior games. A wider, more complex range of choices, intertwining storylines that affect each other, though nothing crazy, to be honest. The game does have a variety of endings, but this is more a consequence of it featuring three independent storylines with multiple endings each. If you combine all the possibilities, then yeah, I can believe there are between 40 and 80 unique endings, as Google and Reddit say. Apparently, not even the people over at Quantic Dream can tell. And as much as I like the game, I'm not going to try to find them all.

So, does this mean the choices really do matter? Well.. That's a good question. Some do, some don't, some do a little. While there are a few big choices that change the whole story, most of them just build towards future events, without actually



changing anything by themselves. Like a good ol' karma system. If, when escaping your abusive owner's house as Kara, you decide to grab the gun and kill the guy, he will not be able to chase you around the house. But if you do not take the gun, he will follow you around, there will be a struggle, and he will end up injured but alive. And then he will have the chance to go on TV and twist the events, which will impact the public opinion on androids negatively. You will escape the house regardless. Is this single thing going to make humans hate androids more? Probably not, but now it will be harder to reach that positive public opinion, which will in turn affect Markus' revolution story. And so on. In most instances, you'll be changing how a scene in particular will develop instead of how it will end, which makes sense. If each scene really had a very different outcome, the game would branch to infinity, and the story would be way harder to navigate. The way it works, many events will happen no matter what (as long as you make it out alive), but in different ways and carrying different consequences.

Aside from choices, about 70% of the gameplay of DBH consists of quick time events. And I feel very conflicted about this design choice. Some of them are used flawlessly to make you feel more immersed in the story, some of them are another form of choice-making, and some of them are just... pointless. The game is a very long cutscene most of the time, after all, so it's afraid you will get bored and stop watching. To make sure you don't, it makes you an active participant of the scenes by not continuing until you press A to open the door. This, in turn, makes the scenes feel a lot more awkward and less fluid, and it feels very unnecessary since the game is essentially on pause until you press the button you're prompted to. On the other hand, however, the action scenes (also QTE-based) were super fun, at least for me. There are stakes at play if you fail the QTEs, and they are tense, fast-paced, and fitted to each dodge, jump, and punch. They give enough leeway to recover if you fail some of the QTEs, too, so you can focus on the story if you don't want to worry about failing the action scenes. And you can even turn the difficulty of these scenes down if you want.



...but what are you really?"

The story of Detroit: Become Human is a civil rights story. It's pretty much "what if segregation and blatantly open racism all over again, but it's the year 2038?". And, honestly, in this regard, it's lacking. It's a cool concept, while not exactly novel, but it's just executed poorly. The androids feel pretty much like normal people, except they don't have rights for plot reasons. The "good" route feels like [that one Pepsi ad](#) where Kendall Jenner helps at a protest by giving a Pepsi to a police officer. It's a very idealized version of the fight for civil rights. Not to mention that often the worldbuilding felt very shallow. For instance, most characters, save for the three protagonists and Hank, have very black or white views. All the humans are bad (except literally two), and all the androids are good (unless you decide to go batshit with Connor). Androids don't feel any kind of internal conflict upon "waking up" and becoming deviants, despite their entire mindset being changed in a few seconds. Humans are unnecessarily combative when it comes to androids, and despite most people owning at least one, none of them feel sympathy for them.

However, all the things DBH lacks in general worldbuilding and story, it makes up for in the individual stories and the characters. The game is flawed, but it doesn't have a 95% positive rating on Steam for nothing. People adore these characters, and for good reasons. The characters and their individual struggles do manage to resonate with the audience, and they are charismatic, each with their own stories and goals, not knowing how they're affecting each other. But I want to talk about each of them separately.



Now are you ready to follow me?

Markus starts off having it all. He's a custom model, built to be the caretaker of a famous painter who actually cherishes him and kind of considers him his son when his actual son ends up being a junkie relying on his father's fortune. This same son causes the painter's death, and Markus gets the blame and is thereby destroyed and thrown to the junkyard. This is the start of Markus' story, and from here on, we start getting a very Messiah-like vibe from him. He comes back from the dead after being thrown into the junkyard (sound familiar?), will most likely become the leader of Jericho (what a curious name), and his whole deal is saving his people from slavery and leading them to freedom, which is a common theme in the Old Testament. His story is quite straight-forward. His most important choice is whether to conduct a pacifist or violent revolution, and therefore he's the character that influences the public opinion the most. To be completely honest, Markus has always been my favorite one between the three. He's cool and has different colored eyes for cool reasons. I like him.



She needs me... and I need her

Kara is arguably the character with the lowest stakes in the whole game. While Markus is busy leading the android uprising and Connor is busy trying to stop it, Kara just wants to find a safe place for her and the kid, Alice. After escaping from an abusive household where she was a housekeeping android, she spends the next week going from place to place, trying to find a way out of the US because there are no android laws in Canada. One can say that her story is the most boring (I certainly say it; much of it is... slow and pointless, especially with the addition of a certain plot twist at the end), but at the same time, Kara has the most death chances in the whole game, so at least her route is pretty action-packed. In any case, I like her route as a concept. While I don't really like the character, I think a counter to Markus and Connor's Big and Important routes was a good thing.

However, while Kara might not stand out as much as the other two main characters, a good point in her favor is her route-specific secondary characters. In their journey to a safer life, she and Alice will encounter a variety of other castaway deviants. Honorary mentions are Ralph, Jerry, and, of course, Luther.



Why did you have to wake up, when all you had to is obey?

I left the best for last. Connor is probably the best part of the game. “But Adri, didn’t you say Markus was your fav-” Yes. Yes, I did. But Connor is objectively better in every aspect. Connor is a super-advanced prototype designed by Cyberlife specifically to aid the police with the investigation on deviancy. He’s also assigned to be the partner of Hank, a hard-boiled lieutenant with a deep dislike for androids. Unlike the other two, Connor doesn’t become a deviant in the beginning of the story; he stays a machine for a longer time (even all of it if you so choose), hunting deviants down with Hank. So not only is his route unique to the others, it’s also the most interesting one. His character has the most range for development, and his relationship with Hank is one of the most satisfactory ones in the whole game. Connor will start out as a machine with a task to accomplish, but as he investigates deviants, he will start experiencing more and more human things. Empathy, fear of death, affection. He will develop these as the story progresses and will cease being just a machine... if you want. Connor is interesting because you really choose how human he is and whether he develops deviancy at all. His development of deviancy is a game-long process that you can follow or steer away from. And this, of course, opens up a lot of possibilities.

Not to mention, Connor is the most charismatic of them all. I can’t get enough of him being sassy with Hank.

It’s time to decide who you really are

I focused on the story and the gameplay, and didn’t say anything about the graphics or music yet, so what about those? Well, they’re good. The music is good. It’s fitting, and as far as I know, each character had their own composer to make sure they had different, unique styles. The sound design is also good; nothing stood out to me in a negative or positive way. The graphics... Well, they’re good, they’re realistic, but some faces just look uncanny thanks to Cage’s extreme reliance on actors with motion-tracking suits. But for the most part, everything is fine, and not much stands out. The shots are very carefully crafted, though. It is a very cinematic game, and it knows that’s its strong suit. The composition and lighting are spectacular in some scenes.

Another thing I wanted to point out is that, despite the amount of outcomes and endings, it’s not a hard game to 100%. You can do it in about three playthroughs without using a guide, two if you use one. So that’s a relief for achievement hunters.

I really like this game. I plan to do a few more playthroughs just for the sake of seeing what happens. I can watch it on YouTube, but it’s more fun if I do it myself.

■ kiir0ichi

STORY ★★★★★☆
GRAPHICS ★★★★★☆
GAMEPLAY ★★★★★☆
SOUND ★★★★★★
FUN METER ★★★★★★



- Great characters
- Good voice acting
- Great graphics and OST
- Very handy flowchart to go back to specific parts of the game



- Shallow worldbuilding
- Most QTEs are pointless
- Plot holes
- Can be slow at times

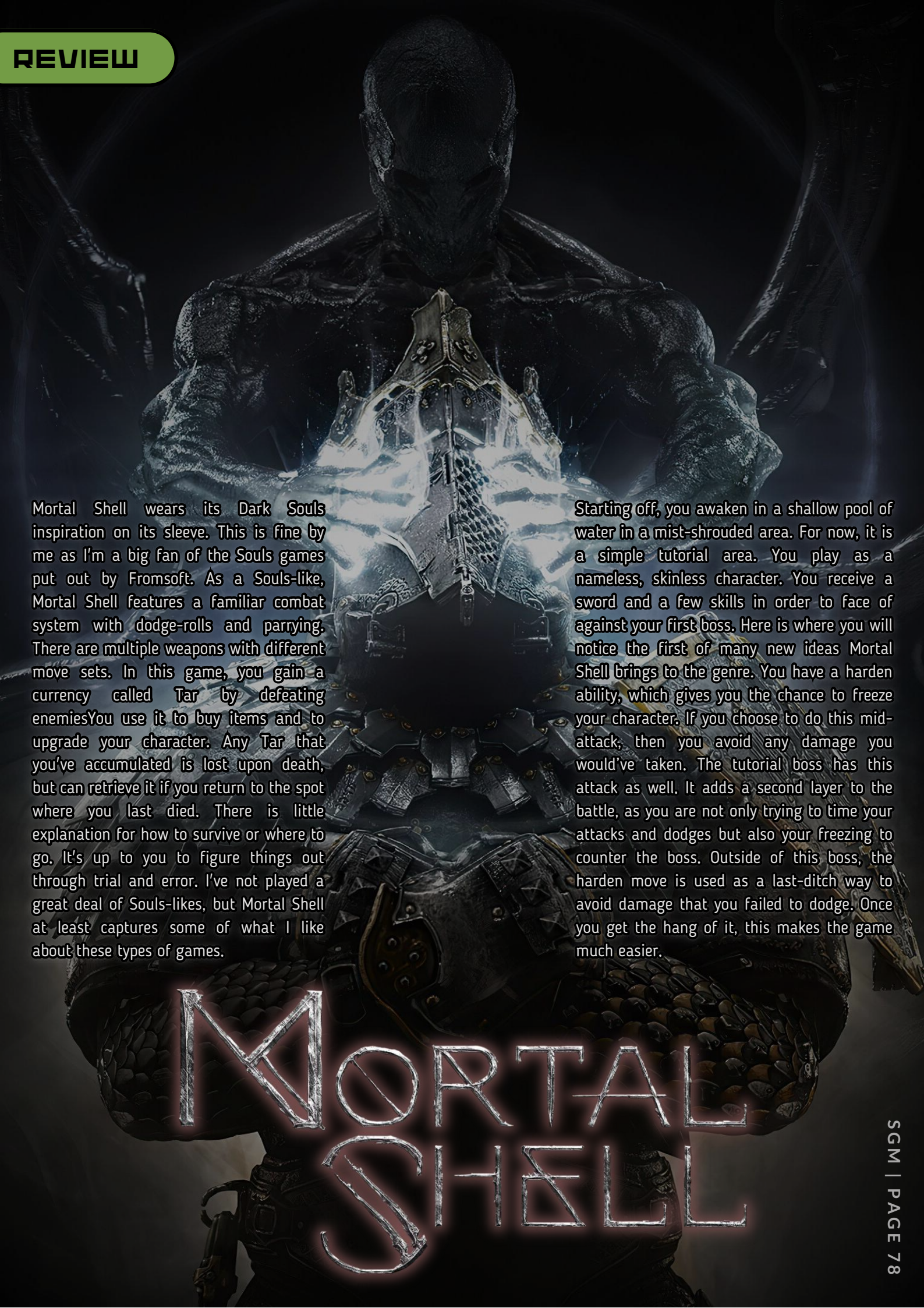
V
E
R
D
I
C
T

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi
Developer: Quantic Dream
Release Date: June 18, 2020

System Req: AMD Ryzen 3 1300X, 12 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1060, 55 GB available space.

CHOICES
DEFINE
HUMANITY.
WHAT WILL
YOU BECOME?





Mortal Shell wears its Dark Souls inspiration on its sleeve. This is fine by me as I'm a big fan of the Souls games put out by Fromsoft. As a Souls-like, Mortal Shell features a familiar combat system with dodge-rolls and parrying. There are multiple weapons with different move sets. In this game, you gain a currency called Tar by defeating enemies. You use it to buy items and to upgrade your character. Any Tar that you've accumulated is lost upon death, but can retrieve it if you return to the spot where you last died. There is little explanation for how to survive or where to go. It's up to you to figure things out through trial and error. I've not played a great deal of Souls-likes, but Mortal Shell at least captures some of what I like about these types of games.

Starting off, you awaken in a shallow pool of water in a mist-shrouded area. For now, it is a simple tutorial area. You play as a nameless, skinless character. You receive a sword and a few skills in order to face off against your first boss. Here is where you will notice the first of many new ideas Mortal Shell brings to the genre. You have a harden ability, which gives you the chance to freeze your character. If you choose to do this mid-attack, then you avoid any damage you would've taken. The tutorial boss has this attack as well. It adds a second layer to the battle, as you are not only trying to time your attacks and dodges but also your freezing to counter the boss. Outside of this boss, the harden move is used as a last-ditch way to avoid damage that you failed to dodge. Once you get the hang of it, this makes the game much easier.

MORTAL SHELL

Unfortunately, I was not successful in defeating the tutorial boss, but I would have more chances. In order to acquire a new weapon in this game, you have to face this same boss, called Hadren, while he attacks you with it. These fights always take place in the same misty, watery arena. If you defeat Hadren, he sinks beneath the surface, and a giant fish swallows you up. After finishing the game, I don't really know any more about Hadren or the fish.

In this new Shell, you enter the game proper. The verdant, swampy forest of Fallgrim creates a great first impression. There are several different paths to choose from. It feels very maze-like. There are groups of enemies that have set up camps here. They have tents and sit around fires, eating questionable meat from skewers until you get too close. They aren't particularly strong, but if you're careless, they can overwhelm you. They also have set up steel traps everywhere. If you

enemies by playing a song. Maxing out familiarity changes the item description. In the case of the lute, it was "The sheer audacity incites enemies to violence from a great distance." I could also change the type of song I was playing. It's not a big change, but it gives an idea of how items work in this game. Use it once to learn what it does. Max it out to gain additional perks. I tried out the lute on a bigger enemy that I wanted to lure away from its group. My song must have really enraged it because, with a leaping blow, it hit me so hard that I was knocked out of my Shell. Everything froze for a moment. I had a chance to get back into my shell and fight back. Having survived, I continued to wander the oppressive forest.



After the tutorial, you come across the second new idea of the game and the reason behind the name Mortal Shell. There is a suit of armor that you can inhabit. In your regular form, you are not very strong. A few hits, and you are dead. With this new suit of armor, you can withstand more damage. It's not just the armor but also the corpse inside it. You fight like this person. You also retain a small whisper of their memories. There is no armor to attain in Mortal Shell and no upgrades to your character. In order to change your health or stamina, you must locate these Shells. There are four in total.

don't watch your movement, you will get your ankle caught in them. You can also lure your enemies into them. The fighting space is usually small, so careful maneuvering is required. Mushrooms grow here and can naturally be picked. Over time, they regenerate, so you can get more the next time you pass by. Once in your inventory, the item description says only, "Use this item to reveal its effect."

Soon after, I found a lute with the same item description. The lute seemed safer than the mushroom, so I gave it a try. After using it, the description changed. I could lure

Finally, I found my way to a stone tower. Inside, I met Sester Genessa, a mysterious masked figure who serves to awaken new abilities if you pay her in Tar and Glimpses, a more rare form of currency. By unlocking these new abilities, which vary from increased health to new moves, you also gain small insights into the person whose body you now control. Also in the tower are a merchant (with a cat you can pet), a chained giant, and spots for your other weapons and Shells. There are four weapons in total, and examining each spot on the wall gives you visual clues on where to go in order to locate each one. There is also a workbench where you can upgrade these weapons once you have the necessary items. By removing a seal from the giant, you acquire the ability to parry attacks and also receive the game's main quest.

There are beings called the Revered. They are gods, or god-like, and cults of Devout have sprung up in this land that worship one of the three Revered. The Shells that you possess belong to or have involvement with these cults. It's a dark fantasy world, so by learning more about who the Shells used to be and the nature of the cults, you learn lots of bad and dark stuff. The Revered are important to people because they produce Nektar. Tar is a safer and significantly less potent version of Nektar. Drinking actual Nektar gives visions and rends the illusions of the world. It allows one to see the past and the future or reveals hidden truths. No one can really choose what they see, so it often drives people to madness. The Revered are infants, in a sense, who have the capacity of developing into something greater. Thus, the Devout protect them as well as worship them.

After you fight your way through the worshippers and reach their god, you can face a boss, the protector of the Revered. Once a boss is defeated, there is nothing standing between you and the True Nektar of the Sacred Gland. Extracting this is fatal to the Revered. The giant in the tower, known as the Old Prisoner, wants you to bring these Glands to him. He says this will help heal him, and in exchange, he unlocks new attacks for you.



Honestly, the lore in Mortal Shell is very convoluted. After beating the game, I only had unlocked a third of the lore and didn't really understand what I had learned. Most of what I found is inscribed on stone monuments. I found another type, called an Etching, by accidentally hitting a random spot to reveal it. More lore is locked within the DLC (which costs extra). If lore is your thing, I feel like you will come away disappointed. During my full playthrough, I gained enough Glimpses to unlock all the abilities and lore of one of the four Shells. It wasn't even the Shell I was most interested in, who is revealed to once have been the lover of Sester Genessa before he died. Having learned all of the lore for my main Shell, I didn't really come away knowing much more about him or the world of Mortal Shell.

The sounds here are great. You can hear the weight of attacks, the ambience of the swamp, and the grotesque savagery of the world. The most interesting thing about the bosses is that there is optional music for them by Rotting Christ. Metal and Dark Souls sort of go hand in hand, and here is a game that embraces that to an extent. However, this music is not enabled at first. If you didn't know about this feature, you could go the entire game only hearing the ambient soundtrack.





The level designs are mixed. Some are really good. The Fallgrim area is twisting and cramped. The enemy placement has some thought put into it. I got lost a number of times. Other levels are the same as you've seen in a number of dark medieval fantasy games. None are as interesting as Fallgrim. The bosses are not very difficult. I died to them once, if at all. Enemies become too familiar. To break it down differently, there are five areas total in Mortal Shell, including the tutorial.

There are more than twenty in Dark Souls. There are around twenty enemies in Mortal Shell. There are over a hundred regular enemies in Dark Souls. Locking on to a target can present camera issues similar to those in other third-person games with close-up combat. Some enemies pop in well after you should have seen them. I think the devs actually rolled with this and made one type of enemy start off as invisible. I didn't experience much else in the way of bugs. Some frame stuttering, but nothing game-breaking.





The new concepts and ideas that this game brings to the genre are worth experiencing, but the game is over before you know it. If Mortal Shell were the size of a regular Dark Souls game, I feel like it would have room to really let its ideas flourish. I like what is here. I wish there was more game around it. I see Mortal Shell as a sort of proof-of-concept. There's a story I really want to tell about the moment I found a new Shell. I was in an overwhelming fight and would have died, but in that exact moment, I discovered something unique about that particular Shell that was exactly what I needed in order to survive.

I won't get more detailed than that because I think experiencing those moments should be preserved for anyone who wants to play Mortal Shell. The great moments here are worth experiencing, like finding out which of your consumables actually cause you harm, or that there's an NPC that wants you to give up your quest and just get drunk with him (and you can!), or that one type of enemy will rip its own head off and throw it at you in a last-ditch effort to poison you. Beyond these, the rest of the game feels fairly generic. I am interested to see what else Cold Symmetry will do in the future.

I wholeheartedly recommend Mortal Shell to fans of the Souls series but as a sort of hors d'oeuvre. Everything here is interesting, but it just didn't have the room to grow. Or maybe it will click with you, and you will want to do multiple playthroughs and hunt down all of the hidden lore. There's an altar that gives you the challenge of playing the game without being able to use Shells at all. The DLC lets you play a rogue-like version of the full game. For the right person, this game has a lot to offer.

■ sweetcuppincakes



STORY ★★☆☆☆☆

GRAPHICS ★★☆☆☆☆

GAMEPLAY ★★☆☆☆☆

SOUND ★★☆☆☆☆

FUN METER ★★☆☆☆☆



- Great atmosphere and sound
- Some great ideas and attention to detail
- Fallgrim is a well-designed area all around



V
E
R
D
I
C
T

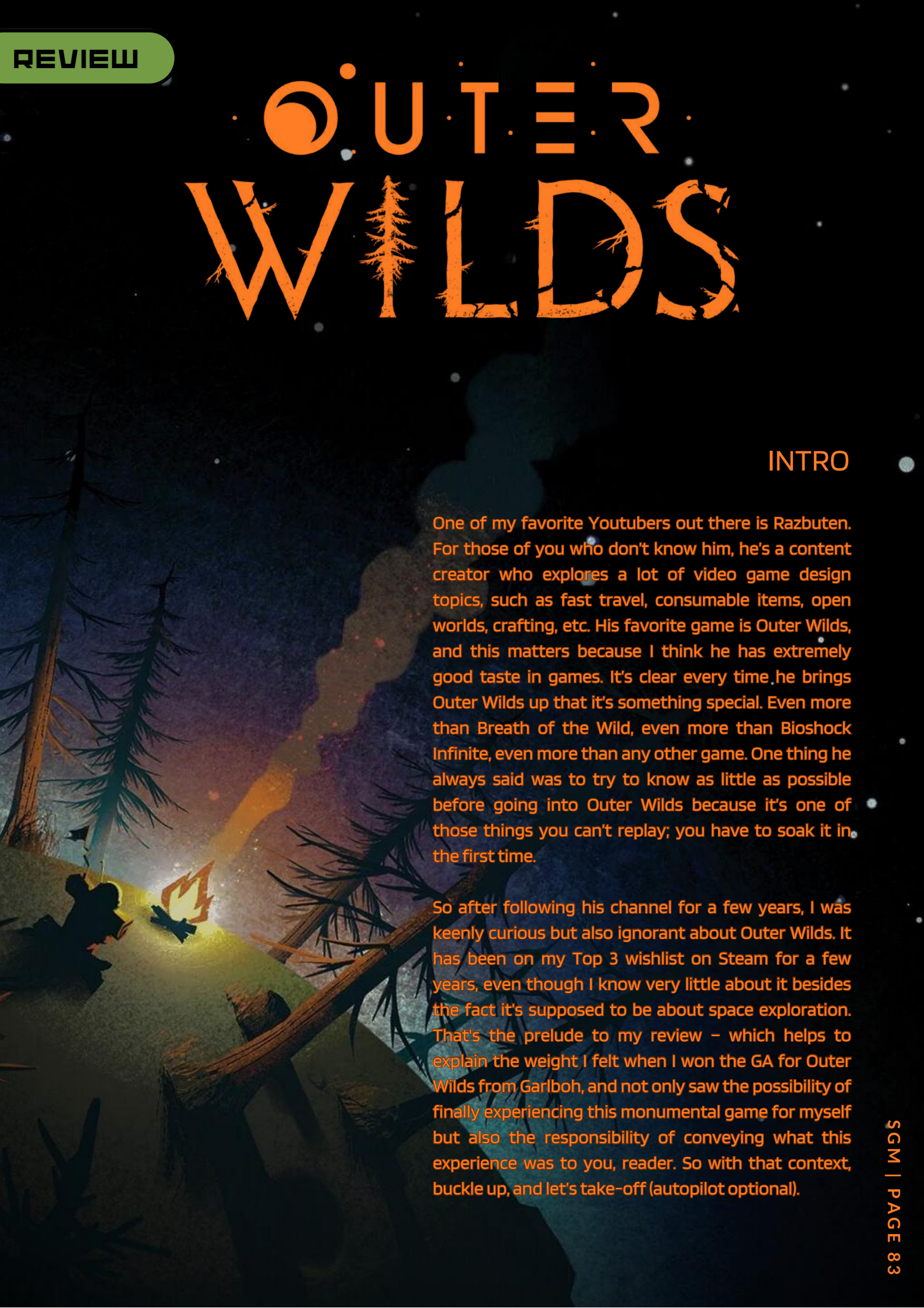
- Short game with sparse story
- Some aspects feel too familiar or bland
- Not very difficult

Genre: Action, Souls-like
Developer: Playstack
Release Date: August 18, 2021

System Req: AMD Ryzen 7, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070, 12 GB available space.

HAVE YOU
CONSIDERED
GETTING
GOOD?



The background of the page is a dark, atmospheric illustration from the game Outer Wilds. It depicts a character in a space suit standing on a rocky, alien landscape at night. A small campfire is burning, casting a warm glow. Tall, thin trees with dark foliage are scattered around. The sky is a deep purple and blue, with a large, bright orange and yellow nebula or comet streaking across it. The title 'OUTER WILDS' is written in a large, stylized, orange font. The word 'OUTER' is in a clean, sans-serif font, while 'WILDS' is in a more distressed, hand-drawn font with a tree silhouette integrated into the letter 'I'.

OUTER WILDS

INTRO

One of my favorite Youtubers out there is Razbuten. For those of you who don't know him, he's a content creator who explores a lot of video game design topics, such as fast travel, consumable items, open worlds, crafting, etc. His favorite game is Outer Wilds, and this matters because I think he has extremely good taste in games. It's clear every time he brings Outer Wilds up that it's something special. Even more than Breath of the Wild, even more than Bioshock Infinite, even more than any other game. One thing he always said was to try to know as little as possible before going into Outer Wilds because it's one of those things you can't replay; you have to soak it in the first time.

So after following his channel for a few years, I was keenly curious but also ignorant about Outer Wilds. It has been on my Top 3 wishlist on Steam for a few years, even though I know very little about it besides the fact it's supposed to be about space exploration. That's the prelude to my review – which helps to explain the weight I felt when I won the GA for Outer Wilds from Garlboh, and not only saw the possibility of finally experiencing this monumental game for myself but also the responsibility of conveying what this experience was to you, reader. So with that context, buckle up, and let's take-off (autopilot optional).

PLOT

I'll try to avoid spoilers here because this is one of these games that, once you know how it works, you can never go back. That said, I still want to cover the plot first and get it out of the way. In summary, you're an astronaut alien from the Hearthian race, a resident of Timber Hearth, one of the planets in the game's solar system. You grew up training to be an astronaut, hearing stories of spacefaring heroes from your village, and dreaming of being one. These stories involve a lot of rumors about distant planets, ruins, advanced civilizations, and all sorts of things. Technology never stopped evolving, so you have a few more gadgets than the astronauts of the past that populate your imagination. And... that's kind of it. Once you get your launch codes and takeoff... the solar system is yours to explore.



gasps for air

While the plot is very vague (at first) and open-ended, that's a big part of the game's allure. It gives you immense freedom to explore whatever and wherever you want, in whichever order you see fit. Mysteries start in one place and unravel throughout the galaxy. Loose threads suddenly come together. The explorers you meet and locations you explore fill in some gaps, but open many others, and you'll be constantly chasing one clue only to see it become five or six new leads. It's a kind of exploration and detective work that is even aided by the Ship's Log – your information repository – which features a "Rumor Mode", which connects threads from across the galaxy like in a film noir. Your number of leads opens wide for a long time, and finally, everything starts to come together and click suddenly towards the end in an immensely satisfying (yet bittersweet) way.



Uhhh Why is light getting distorted near the place I'm falling towards?

GRAPHICS

Outer Wilds looks good, but not great. The developers and artists went for a stylized texture feeling, so characters, buildings, and objects look a bit cartoony. This is fine; it's a style choice and is probably what allows the game to run so smoothly on my machine, along with being shipped in the time and budget that they had. Going for photorealistic graphics would probably have tanked the project, and the stylized texture thing works fine, but it's mostly unremarkable. These textures and characterization improve upon leaving the microscale and jumping to the macro, planetary scale. Looking from afar, every planet is instantly recognizable and unique. This differentiation remains once you start to fly nearby. Hopping throughout the galaxy is a blast, only getting dragged down a bit once you are exploring things at a human scale.

Visual and environmental effects are areas that have way more variation than character models. Sometimes, effects are okay at best, such as when geysers erupt, when waterfalls run through the landscape, and when sand particles fall from the sky. At other times, the visual effects are sound; fog is really good and atmospheric, and explosions and planetary collisions are weighty and have spark. At other times, the visual effects are an absolute spectacle, including planets imploding, stars going supernova, light being distorted near and around black holes, planet-level dynamic systems such as hurricanes, etc.

Light is another area that is really well implemented (and is embedded into some of the puzzles). At a planetary scale, planets and stars cast shadows on other celestial bodies that are really well developed. You can be walking on the moon lit by the sun, and suddenly be enveloped in pitch-black darkness because another planet eclipsed you. That happens frequently and is a joy to experience. When darkness comes (be it because of the sun's position, or because you're in a cave system), your flashlight is reliable. It doesn't light everything but lights enough to get you going, and that's part of the appeal.

Long story short, the game's graphics are mostly serviceable and allow the game to be experienced on modest hardware, while generally looking good and giving you enough visual information to get the job done. It's not a technical marvel, but its stylized look will probably age well and it allows gameplay without hindrance, which is where the game shines.



Mm... marshmallows!



Cancel the barbeque, sweetheart!

SOUND

In the sound department, I have similar feelings to the graphics. Music is a recurring thing in the game, and some of its main motifs are deeply emotional – heck, every time I hear the music at the main menu or at the end of a loop, it pulls on a heartstring. Being an astronaut in the vastness of space can be an isolating experience. However, you can always get your Signalscope (basically a directional microphone) and point towards other planets to hear your fellow space explorers playing their musical instruments, reminding you that you're not alone in the universe. That's a bittersweet feeling that is evoked mostly through sound.

When it comes to sound effects, the game's budget shows. Most are servicable. The sounds you hear on your ship serve as alerts to things you need to do or avoid, there are sound cues for menu navigation, and the environment generally sounds right, just not high fidelity. The wind in Giant Deep sounds... windy, but also generic? The rock cracking in Brittle Hollow sounds ... cracky, but also generic? I can't really point it out (and maybe I shouldn't criticize it too much), but the sound FX felt good, not excellent.

To redeem the sound section of the review, I also want to talk about the aforementioned Signalscope. You can point at things to get hints about points of interest to explore. That's a great way of using sound as a gameplay and puzzle element, and as you uncover new frequencies, the game gives you more things to explore – from your fellow spacefaring explorers to quantum particles to distress beacons and more. It's simple yet charming and fits right into the game, besides helping enormously with navigation.



Rumor Mode view – makes me feel sorry for detectives

GAMEPLAY

Here's the meat of this game and this review. Playing it is a blast. This is a game mainly about exploring, and exploration is where the game shines. I'll start by talking about navigation. You have two main travel modes: spacesuit and spaceship. Both have 360-degrees thrusters that allow you to move in any direction, regardless of where you're looking and the relative speed you're moving into. Granted, 360-degree travel is not easy or immediately intuitive, but you'll be doing it so much in this game that it quickly becomes second nature. When you're near a celestial body (or under the influence of gravity crystals), gravity kicks in and you'll have a frame of reference to "walk" on. However, a lot of times you'll just be cruising in zero-g for the sake of it, and it's a lot of fun. The HUD gives you information on your thrusters and your orientation axis, which helps a lot.

The main differences between spaceship and spacesuit travel are your speed and movement finesse. You'll probably be using your ship to go from planet to planet and to go from the North Pole to the South Pole of a given planet, but once you're in the vicinity of your destination, leaving the ship and heading into the spacesuit tends to be a better option. In the suit, you move much slower and have a limited supply of fuel and air (which are usually unlimited inside the ship), but you can be more precise about where to go. If you're in your suit and fuel starts to run out, most of the time you need to find a spare jetpack left by other explorers (there's usually one or two only per planet) or return to your ship. If your air starts to run out, you need to find trees (frequent on some planets, rare on others) or return to your ship. Fuel runs out, you're stuck. Oxygen runs out, you're dead.



In terms of moveset and inventory, you don't have a lot of options. Your character walks, jumps, interacts with certain objects, can equip a probe launcher (that doubles as a camera) or the Signalscope, use your thrusters, and that's kind of it. On the spaceship your abilities are similar; you thrust around and can equip the autopilot, but not much more. The advantage of that limited moveset and inventory is that you can take your attention from the microgame (such as managing AP, consumables, item grids, weight, etc) and focus instead on the macrogame (big-picture exploration, weaving the story together, next places to explore, etc). That's a great design choice, since the macrogame is where the game excels.

One fantastic example of that is the map. You have a galaxy map, but not a planet map. That means the game nudges you towards points of interest spread out across the galaxy, but not the exact path to get there once you have landed on a planet. That's up to you. It's refreshing to just go crazy in a new unexplored environment, versus the constant nudging you get from open-world games where your objective marker is always on the screen, AND in your minimap, AND in your quest log. There's none of that here. Do you want to check your ship log, the closest you have to a quest log? Sure, it's in your ship. Has your ship been swept away from your planet while you were exploring? Well, too bad, you don't have access to it anymore. It's a game that respects your choices and their consequences (at least while the loop lasts) and doesn't hold the player's hand like many AAA titles.

Speaking of the map and the world at large, everything is accessible from the start. If you know what you're doing, you can beat the game in less than 20 minutes. The magic is in learning how the world works, unlocking the game's secrets, and building your knowledge. The closest thing you have to "progress" in this game is the ability to read texts left behind by an ancient civilization by using a translator, and build on their past discoveries. While the translator seemed unimportant while I was playing the game, it is actually the most important tool in your arsenal.

This knowledge buildup is addictive, and you literally keep playing "just one more mystery, just one more planet" without realizing hours have passed. This is the hallmark of an incredibly well-designed game, but that unfortunately only lasts for your first playthrough.

CONCLUSION

Outer Wilds is one of those games you want to play for "just one more secret". Each run takes around 20 minutes, and can be shorter if you fall into the sun or run out of oxygen. And usually, you'll learn at least one thing about the world in that run but will be left with another question you didn't have before, and this constant "learn something, get three new questions" is an effective gameplay loop that keeps you highly engaged. The story is really well put together and spans the whole galaxy, and involves technology, ancient civilizations, spacefaring, eternal survival, and quantum moon sidequests – what's not to like about that? The gameplay enables that story to be told without too much handholding, and while gameplay and sound are not superb, they also don't hinder gameplay. While there is little replayability, it's easy to see how the gameplay and plot carry Outer Wilds to be the game of the year, every year.

■ fernandopa



STORY ★★★★★★

GRAPHICS ★★★★★☆

GAMEPLAY ★★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★☆

FUN METER ★★★★★★

V E R D I C T

- Truly open-world the galaxy is entirely open to you from the beginning if you know where to go and how to get there
- The plot is well-written and truly encompasses the whole game world - no stone is left unturned
- Graphics are good yet easy on your machine
- Music is simple but enhances the game's atmosphere and sense of benign isolation
- Controls take a while to get used to and can sometimes hinder exploration, forcing you to restart a run and lose immediate progress
- Too little hand-holding can get frustrating – at times, it's easy to feel stuck
- Little replayability - once you know how the universe works, what else can you do?
- A few puzzles are really hard, and feel unfair once you see the solution

Genre: Space, Exploration
Developer: Mobius Digital
Release Date: June 18, 2020

System Req: AMD Ryzen 5 2600X, 8 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1060, 8 GB available space.

I AM COMMANDER SHEPARD, AND THIS IS MY FAVOURITE GAME ON THE CITADEL



In the world of fish games, the most interesting one I have played is How Fish Is Made. It is not for everyone, especially as the first screen of the game warns. To quote, “The game contains potentially disturbing subject matters and TRYPOPHOBIA inducing imagery.” It’s not common for a dev to warn about trypophobia, and while it doesn’t overly bother me, I appreciate the thoughtfulness. If that warning doesn’t dissuade you, then I’d say How Fish Is Made is worth the playthrough.

Up or down? That’s the question your fish is confronted with as it flops through the eerie insides of an unidentified creature. That is, if it’s not a machine. Or is it both? How Fish Is Made leaves a lot to the players’ interpretations. It gives just enough for your imagination to fill in the rest of the setting, and that makes it all the creepier. While How Fish Is Made isn’t a scary game, it’s one that can get the skin crawling, and I found it to indeed fit the description of “disturbing.”



You’ll spend about twenty minutes on a standard playthrough. This lets your fish talk to a handful of NPCs, navigate through several bizarre and fleshy sections, and make the ultimate decision.



Will you pick up or down? The numerous fish you find have their own opinions. They’ll try to convince you of which is better, or in the case of some, they’ll want you to help them make that choice. It’s worth paying attention to their dialogue. The messages this game shares are what I found the most intriguing, and the NPCs all contribute to that in one way or another.

The gameplay is similar to a walking simulator, except as a fish, you’re bouncing down a linear path. I found the older-style 3D graphics to be well suited for the uncanny feel the game is going for. When talking to NPCs, they make different sounds rather than actually being voice acted. The diversity of those sounds was more than I expected. There is no background music, which I think is a good choice for a game with this kind of atmosphere.

I can’t say much more without spoiling important aspects of the experience. With it being a free game and not taking much time to complete, I recommend trying How Fish Is Made. It might cause you to feel uncomfortable, but I find that can make a game all the more memorable. Will you pick up or down? That’s your decision. As for what I chose... does it really matter?

■ Celtic7Guardian



The Super Mario Bros. Movie (2023)

It's-a me, Mario! AtomicBlonde! Fallen Kal! And I'll be your game movie reviewer for this issue, commenting on the 2023 Super Mario Bros. Movie as you may have already guessed. Not the live-action film from 1993, which I did actually see as a kid with my father in an otherwise empty movie theater :D Super Mario Bros. for the Nintendo was probably one of the very first games, if not the first game, I ever played as a young kid so he certainly left an impression on me and I was a big fan when I was young. As I grew older I stopped playing Mario games however and moved on to more mature things. But he'll always have a special place in my heart so I looked forward to watching this movie.



It's important to know that this is very much a kid movie and you shouldn't expect too much from it, it's very silly and nonsensical. I kind of enjoyed it, but it's not a great movie. It's something you watch once with low expectations and forget about. What I did like was: that it's gorgeously animated; the music score is great, with many variations on popular themes of the games; Jack Black is awesome as Bowser (and honestly who doesn't love JB?), while I was surprised to find that Chris Pratt played Mario (and played him well); there were certainly moments that made me laugh, but also some where the humor felt short (probably because it's a kid's movie). But the highlight of the movie for me was Lumalee (a green star-shaped luminescent being), I dare you to not find him funny, I dare you! The main characters do lose their iconic, stereotypical Italian accent early on in the movie (it's explained why in the movie) you may have become accustomed to in the games, but it doesn't really hurt the movie.

What made the movie kind of a miss for me was the general plot, which was very simplistic (understandably for a kid's movie). It felt more like several small clips stitched together by a thin plot. Another thing that bothered me was that it references the Mario games far too much, with several segments just being homages without adding much to the overall story. The movie almost becomes more of an easter egg hunt with some jokes thrown in than that it ever actually tries to tell a good story. A mistake I often see in game movies where they try to hit the nostalgia-factor more than trying to create something original based on an existing franchise. Because of this you're more likely to get something out of this movie, the more you played of these Mario games. In conclusion I found it enjoyable enough to watch once, it had some funny moments, Bowser's Peaches song is amazing, and Lumalee slays! But the story is very disappointing and I personally was missing the cohesion between segments.

Personal Score: 60%

■ FallenKal



Chris Pratt



Anya Taylor-Joy



Charlie Day



Jack Black



Keegan-Michael Key

ABBA Ed Sheeran DUA LIPA SNOOP DOGG CARDI B METALLICA 1D ONE DIRECTION
 BTS IED-ZEPPELIN
 SGM's Playlist AVICII

IMAGINE
 DRAGONS



LINKIN PARK

RIHANNA

KAYE
 WEST

GORILLAZ

SKRILLEX

DEP=CH=MOD=

LANA
 DEL REY

GUNS N' ROSES



BON JOVI

BEYONCÉ

THE NOTORIOUS
 B.I.G.

Karen O - I Shall Rise (SlickWally)
 Medieval Music - 'Hardcore' Party Mix (BabyOilonICE)
 Koji Yamada, Yuko Ishii - File City (Muddy)
 Kunitaka Watanabe- Salonika (Garlboh)
 Stray Kids - MANIAC (abubis)
 Blueberry & Yogurt, Rita - Dorchadas (Celtic7Guardian)
 Datt Punk ft. Julian Casablanca - Instant Crush (AtomicBlonde)
 Horrible Histories Songs - Do the Pachacuti (Orbs)
 Simon Viklund - Bionic Commando Rearmed (La Volpe)
 Beicoli - Beicolt in the Whisper (Kiioichi)
 DION - JUPITER'S TRADE x FACELESS 1-7 (oleksyuk)
 Lianne La Havas - No Room For Doubt (PsychoApeMan)
 Asian Hideout - Sugar Rush (jbondguy007)
 Yoshitaka Hirota - Vicious 1915 (Minoru)

DAFT PUNK

SHAKIRA



RAMMSTEIN

DMX

THE PRODIGY

ARCTIC
 MONKEYS

EMINEM



NIRVANA



Ariana Grande

KISS



D

AC/DC

BACKSTREET BOYS



SCREENSHOT

of the Month



By Zelrune
(Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice)

Honorable Mentions



By damiane103
(Red Dead Redemption 2)



By Sir Packet Lossalot
(ABZU)



By schmoan
(Dave the Diver)

UPCOMING RELEASES IN SEPTEMBER



Starfield is the first new universe in 25 years from Bethesda Game Studios, the award-winning creators of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim and Fallout 4.
Release Date: September 6, 2023



AD INFINITUM

When reality is a nightmare, nightmares become real. In this psychological horror game, you fight the terrifying creatures invading your mind. Can you save your sanity?
Release Date: September 14, 2023



Discover a reborn Mortal Kombat Universe created by the Fire God Liu Kang. Mortal Kombat 1 ushers in a new era of the iconic franchise with a new fighting system, game modes, and fatalities!
Release Date: September 19, 2023



Lies of P is a thrilling soulslike that takes the story of Pinocchio, turns it on its head, and sets it against the darkly elegant backdrop of the Belle Epoque era.
Release Date: September 19, 2023



PAYDAY 3 is the much anticipated sequel to one of the most popular co-op shooters ever. Since its release, PAYDAY-players have been reveling in the thrill of a perfectly planned and executed heist. That's what makes PAYDAY a high-octane, co-op FPS experience without equal.
Release Date: September 21, 2023



IEA SPORTS FC™ 24 welcomes you to The World's Game: the most true-to-football experience ever with HyperMotionV, PlayStyles optimised by Opta, and an enhanced Frostbite™ Engine.
Release Date: September 29, 2023



"Your wish shall perish..." A Holy Grail War begins in Edo Japan. A brand new Fate action RPG presented by TYPE-MOON and KOEI TECMO GAMES.
Release Date: September 29, 2023

**HOT
SALES**

LOOKING FOR NEW
GAMES TO PLAY, ON A
BUDGET?

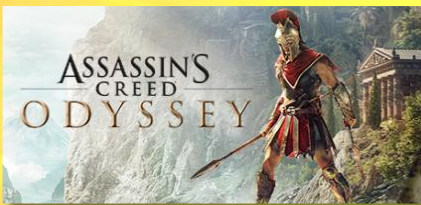
LOOK NO MORE!
SKELETOR HAS THE
BEST DEALS FOR YOU!



Far Cry® 5 - 85% Off. Buy it for €8.99
(Sale ends 21st of September)



Marvel's Avengers - DE - 90% Off. Buy it for €3.99
(Sale ends 30th of September)



Assassin's Creed® Odyssey - 80% Off. Buy it for €11.99
(Sale ends 19th of September)



Yakuza: Like a Dragon - 80% Off. Buy it for €11.99
(Sale ends 21st of September)



Banished - 66% Off. Buy it for €6.45
(Sale ends 19th of September)



Dragon Age™ Inquisition - 88% Off. Buy it for €4.79
(Sale ends 25th of September)

Sales as HOT as me!

GET THEM
WHILE YOU
CAN!

SGM REVIEWERS LEADERBOARD



1. **VinroylsViral** - 31 pts (+8)
2. **Volcanic** - 30pts
3. **Pavlina** - 27pts (+4)
4. **kiiroichi** - 21pts
5. **fernadopa** - 20pts
6. **Muddy** - 18pts (+4)
7. **shuvam09** - 17pts
8. **Thexder** - 17pts (+2)
9. **BloodHood** - 16pts (+1)
10. **AiKirika** - 13pts (+8)
11. **Fallen Kal** - 12pts
12. **freshduke** - 12pts
13. **FSpectro** - 11pts
14. **GrowingStrong** - 11pts (+3)
15. **PsychoApeMan** - 11pts (+3)
16. **BAEuro** - 11pts (+5)
17. **abubis** - 10pts
18. **hodexii** - 10pts
19. **quijote3000** - 10pts
20. **Celtic7Guardian** - 9pts
21. **RayOfLight** - 9pts
22. **Jorin** - 8pts (+5)
23. **Alpha2749** - 7pts
24. **Naycon** - 7pts
25. **sweetcuppincakes** - 7pts
26. **Nidetag** - 7pts (new entry)
27. **XYUSoma** - 6pts
28. **Chris Kutcher** - 5pts
29. **DanteFromHell** - 5pts
30. **MyrXIII** - 5pts
31. **ManlyMeatMan** - 4pt (+3)
32. **ghidy77** - 3pts
33. **nightshine** - 3pts
34. **R3v3ng3ance** - 3pts
35. **schmoan** - 3pts (new entry)
36. **Faloperito** - 2pts
37. **XS1Goliath** - 2pts
38. **CBlade** - 2pts (new entry)
39. **MetalFreak** - 1pt
40. **Themnish** - 1pt

The "SGM Leaderboard" counts every single vote from the "Best Review" vote poll on the SteamGifts platform.

The scores will be updated with each new issue released.

Once a new issue is released, the points from the previous vote poll will stop being counted.

Top 5 will enter 5 separate giveaways for:

- Life is Strange: True Colors
- Hogwarts Legacy
- God of War
- Cuphead
- Sifu

In case of multiple wins, the winner will have to chose a game and re-roll the rest.

1st place will have priority over the rest. 2nd will have priority over 3rd, 4th and 5th. And so on...

6th to 30th will enter a special invite-only "Wave" of giveaways made by our Contributors.

In which the same "pick one and drop the rest" rule will apply, but without ranking priority!

The Event ends on 25th of December 2023!

Or in the final issue if we don't make it that far :)

✦ CREDITS AND THANKS! ✦

Hello Guys and Gals,

Thank you once again for supporting us and reading our quirky little magazine!

As always, I hope that we can continue to improve as we move forward, and I look forward to seeing more of you deciding to join us!

I would also like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to everyone who helped us directly. Without their assistance, this issue would not have been possible.

Now, let's get into the specifics! We want to extend our thanks to:

OUR CONTRIBUTORS, because without them we wouldn't have games to review in the first place

- Garlboh**, for giving us Devil May Cry 5, CHRONO TRIGGER, and Outer Wilds
- Celtic7Guardian**, for giving us Celeste, Armello, and Cultist Simulator
- Muddy**, for giving us The Last Campfire and Styx: Master of Shadows
- BloodHood**, for giving us Detroit: Become Human
- VinroyIsViral**, for giving us Mortal Shell
- WallyKazam**, for giving us Röki

OUR EDITORS, who made the magazine easier to read for all of us

- RayOfLight**, for editing Cyber Hook, I Am Fish, Armello, The Last Campfire, Styx: Master of Shadows, Röki, Rollerdrome, Devil May Cry 5, and Detroit: Become Human
- Celtic7Guardian**, for editing Celeste, Outer Wilds. and How Fish is Made
- Orbs**, for editing STAR WARS™ - The Force Unleashed and Cultist Simulator
- sweetcuppincakes**, for editing American Truck Simulator and CHRONO TRIGGER
- VinroyIsViral**, for editing Mortal Shell

OUR ARTIST AND OUR DESIGNERS, because what's a magazine but a gargantuan artistic effort?

- Muddy**, for designing the pages for Celeste, The Last Campfire, and Styx: Master of Shadows
- La Volpe**, for designing the pages for Rollerdrome and Cultist Simulator
- Celtic7Guardian**, for co-designing the pages for I Am Fish and How Fish is Made
- Kihiroichi**, for designing the pages and cover for Detroit: Become Human, while also creating new Paige Art!

Join Us.

Reviewer. Contributor. Editor. Reader.

What's Your Role?

SGM