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ON THE DOT



CONTENTS

REGULARS

- 8 Ed's Note
- 10 Inbox
- 14 Bytes
- 28 home_coded
- 76 Mosh Pit

OPINION

- 14 The Game Stalker
- 16 Pixel Fix
- 60 Hardwired
- 82 Game Over

PREVIEW

- 34 Guild Wars 2: Heart of Thorns
- 36 Heroes of the Storm
- 40 Project CARS

REVIEWS

- 52 Reviews: Introduction
- 52 Mini review: Kairo
- 53 Mini review: Apotheon
- 54 Dying Light
- 57 Grim Fandango Remastered
- 58 The Talos Principle
- 59 Blackguards 2

HARDWARE

- 61 Dream Machine
- 62 Versus: GIGABYTE GTX 960 G1 Gaming vs MSI GTX 960 Gaming 2G
- 66 BenQ XL2430T Gaming Monitor
- 68 GIGABYTE X99 SOC-Champion
- 70 Razer BlackWidow Ultimate Chroma / Razer Kraken 7.1 Chroma
- 71 Razer DeathAdder Chroma
- 72 Cougar 200K gaming keyboard / Skullcandy Air Raid Bluetooth speaker / Astrum BT-032D Bluetooth speaker and charging dock
- 74 Lazy Gamer's Guide: Marvel Unlimited



FEATURES

30 THE OTHER GUYS

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II

We travel back in time to 2009, when *Dawn of War II* was all the rage and trimming Ork ears with a chainsword was the best way to spend your days. Now with 100% less Games for Windows LIVE.

44 BATTLEFIELD HARDLINE

It's almost as if the *SWAT* series hadn't disappeared and instead evolved into a manic multiplayer thrill-ride full of outrageous car chases and jaw-dropping explosions. Mostly though, it's everything you want from *Battlefield*, but with cops and robbers in place of all the modern military shenanigans.

ON THE DVD

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DRIVERS

NVIDIA ForceWare 347.25 WHQL 32/64-Bit

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19 GameTrailers Best of 2014 Awards / 84 game trailers

EXTRAS

Cheatbook Database + updates
41 wallpapers

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Let's just say anything



During a recent video update, Peter Molyneux, overlord of “experimental” game development studio 22cans and all-round legendary game developer, told the community desperate for updates on his god sim *Godus* that he’s working on a new IP. He’ll assume a mentorship role of sorts on *Godus*, but is moving the bulk of the studio’s resources to *The Trail*, Molyneux’s next game that is now the new best thing in the world ever.

In response to constant hammering about the many bad decisions he made concerning *Godus*, Molyneux did what Molyneux always does: slag himself off, fall upon his sword with apologies and “hindsight is 20/20”, and promise that it’ll never happen again. This is something that he’s done since the release of the first *Fable* (a good game, but it fell far short of the promises he made back then), and is something that he’ll probably continue to do until he eventually leaves this industry.

I hate criticising game developers (the devs themselves, not their games) because I have immense respect for what they do, even those considered to be failures. But when Peter Molyneux admits to blatantly lying to

secure his Kickstarter funding goal, as he did in the following snippet from an interview with *techradar.com*, it’s tough to not be irritated:

“There’s this overwhelming urge to over-promise because it’s such a harsh rule: if you’re one penny short of your target then you don’t get it. And of course in this instance, the behaviour is incredibly destructive, which is ‘Christ, we’ve only got 10 days to go and we’ve got to make £100,000, for f**k’s sake, let’s just say anything.’ So I’m not sure I would do that again.”

Making games is hard – really hard sometimes. It’ll push you beyond limits you can barely comprehend, but it can be rewarding if you’re honest, diligent, and stick to the reason you started in the first place: to give people enjoyment. I can’t help but think Molyneux has forgotten why he got into this business.

With that little rant over, let’s get down to what’s happening this month! Of course, our cover feature is all about *Battlefield Hardline*. We’re big fans of the *BF* franchise so this departure from the norm, and the inclusion of Visceral as lead developers, piqued our interest.

Another game that has managed to grab our attention is *Heroes of the Storm*. Currently in beta, this game is oddly appealing to even those of us who don’t spend much time with MOBAs.

We also return to our not-so-regular The Other Guys feature, with *Dawn of War II* taking the stage this month. Barkskin and I had great fun resurrecting this gem of an RTS, so please enjoy his account of the experience, and let us know what other gems out there deserve our attention.

And there’s a *Dying Light* review! Most of us at the office are playing this game at the moment and loving every minute of it. Sure, it’s just *Far Cry* with zombies and some jumpy bits, but that’s fine by us.

That’s it for now. Take it easy, and please enjoy this issue of NAG! **NAG**

-GeometriX

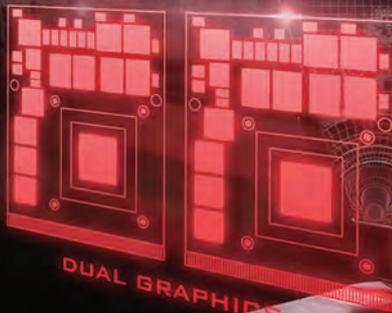
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Inbox

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letters@nag.co.za

Letter of the Month March 2015



From: Justin Van Huyssteen

Subject: Games turned me into a monster

Video games have made me into some kind of a monstrous being! They have transformed me from a snot nosed little child to an English major who enjoys reading classic literature and poetry! Oh, how the violent, violent video games I have played have made me so evil!

Without a dosage of *Manhunt*, *Hotline Miami* and other horrendously violent games I would never have become this calm a person. Had I instead taken up a

different vocation, like watching reality television, and I might have been spared the harsh reality of having to live as a man who enjoys complex stories, character development and meaningful messages... why must I live such a tormented life...

Without games I would never have taken up reading *The Divine Comedy*, learning about different cultures from around the world or writing a few of my own novels. Oh, how games have made me have such a disciplined and diplomatic temperament! Why? Why *GTA*?! Why have you stopped me from committing crimes?! Why *Spec Ops*?! Why did you make me fall in love with powerful and emotional war stories?! Why *Fallout*?! Why did you make me contemplate the ramifications of nuclear war and the socio-political issues that would follow in its wake?!

Video games ruined my life... they made me yearn for knowledge, they challenged me and they improved my love of profound and interesting stories... oh, how games have made me so bad over the many years since I started bloodily slaughtering my enemies in *Unreal Tournament* at the age of five... if not for games I would never have become who I am today... so thanks games... you ruined my life...

I knew I should have listened to the mass media... they were right about games all along...

THIS MONTH'S PRIZE

The "Letter of the month" prize is sponsored by the good folks at Megarom. The winner receives two games for coming up with the most inspired bit of wisdom or cleverness. **NOTE /** You can't change the games or the platform they come on.



Thanks for being the voice of sanity in a world that's largely gone mad. Everyone needs a form of escape from reality, and sometimes that escape comes with a sawed-off shotgun and a hit list. Some people play with My Little Ponies or go on shopping sprees, other people listen to death metal or sculpt tiny movie scenes. It just so happens that you play excessively violent games because that's what you need to chill out. Good for you. Have a couple of free games. I know they're not violent ones but maybe you could drive into a few walls or try to hit the bowler with a cricket ball or something. Ed.

From: David Tshitenda

Subject: Nudity In Games

These days I been see more common than usual the amount of nudity in games and I feel that it is not a good image for publishes and the developers and I have 2 point or reason to justify myself. For my first point I just would like to pose it as a question, why do people in the game industry get angry/furious when they are criticized on sexual content in games, because it is so uncommon that when I does appear it is shocking,

just to be clear,I am not trying to say that developers and publishers are trying to sneak sex in the minds of children and family around the world. Secondly I feel that people are uncomfortable with sex in games because games are still perceived as being a product for children. I just would like to give a few examples of games I thought just didn't need nudity or sex: Far cry 3 it is an amazing, fully enjoyed it and when I reached the end where I **[Snip. Spoilers removed. Ed]**. It's a surprisingly

graphic scene, featuring complete full frontal nudity from Citra. Another game which I was really disgusted with was *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* in one of the very first scene of the game the gamer/player is treated to a sequence involving Geralt and Triss waking up in bed together, completely naked. This was a prelude to a large amount of graphic sexual encounters, including the notorious water scene where Triss magically removes her entire outfit. For my final game(s) which I was very shocked with

is the games in the Metro series it was the last game I would let the gamer be paying for a topless one-on-one session with a young stripper and what was sad for me was that the game features the ability to pay for a lap dance in the first place but the most intimate can be found in Metro Last Light. **[Snip. Ed].** Just to finish off I'd like to give you guys a scenario if you have a younger brother (aged 12) that likes games and in the presence of your mother he plays a game such as The Witcher 2: Assassins of King and he gets to the sex scene, how would that feel for you as an older brother.

This letter both intrigues and bothers me. But let's look at the interesting bits first.

I'm the sort of liberal hippy who believes that sex in media isn't nearly as damaging as people think. I'd say that excessive simulated violence has more destructive potential, but then I also believe that anyone who's exposed to these sorts of things should do so under some form of guidance. Help little Johnny through the awkward "Mommy, why is that man shooting fireballs at all those people, and when can I do that?" moments.

So let's get to the other point you made: what happens when a 12 year-old sees Geralt and Triss going at it like a couple of bunnies on ecstasy? First, when you expose your little brother to a game rated 18+ that features copious amounts of violence, you take the responsibility to educate him on what's happening in the game. You put it into context. It's your problem, because you've made the decision to play this game in front of him. If this game contains sex scenes and that makes you feel weird because you're mom is in the room, maybe you're not mature enough to play this game, let alone in front of your younger brother.

You say that there's a perception amongst some people that games are toys designed for children. Why, then, would you allow a 12 year-old to watch a game like The Witcher?

I disagree with your letter but it's nonetheless thought provoking. Just maybe not for the reasons you intended. Ed.

From: Nikita Erasmus

Subject: We are Legion

Nag this is a message from we are legion saying who we are and what we do We Are Legion United in victory, united in defeat, these are the words we live by. As a multi-gaming organisation, we pride ourselves in

ON THE FORUMS

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then you better stop lurking and sign up for the forums. Don't judge us from the outside, judge us from the inside. And then once you're in, don't judge us at all. Help us judge the outside instead. Join us at www.nag.co.za/forums/

QUESTION / What failed game do you think should make a comeback?

Bulletstorm, hells bells that game was fun.

- tarisma

Fable, but in a similar style to TLC.

- Toxxyc

Duke Nukem. Forever was a mess but a new game with a properly managed team could revive the series.

- LazyDemoni

Psychonauts. Granted, Double Fine seems to be sniffing paint thinners lately, but still, Psychonauts.

- Squirly

My vote is for Hellgate: London. It was a terrible game but it was fun as hell (heh)-

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our ability to provide mentor-ship, a positive community and individual skill improvement no matter the opposition or competition. We aim to continue growing our organisation to incorporate more teams, with even more passionate individuals, all of whom are capable of victory and humble in defeat. Established 2014, we are the new kids on the block, however that in no way undermines our capability or desire to win. Through continuous growth and practice the teams in our organisation will strive to be the best, whilst remaining true to the core values of kindness, honesty and loyalty. We pride ourselves on being open to all players with a good mind set and strong team play capabilities. We are Legion, united in victory, united in defeat.

Er, cool, folks. That sounds like fun. Don't stay out too late now, ya hear? Ed.

From: Brandon Fowler

Subject: Past or Present?

There is a lot of hype about Upcoming games and newly released titles, but is that what's really important? I will never forget the time I played the 2007 title Lost Odyssey on my xbox 360,

the game didn't seem like it was going to be great, but the compilation of 4 discs seemed like it was an in depth and very detailed game, when first playing this game I got drawn straight into the concept of Kai, but the turning point where I really started loving this game is when you find your daughter and grandchildren in a nice enough setting, but due to circumstances your daughter passes away, I remember tearing up at this point and it leaves me with the question, will we get games like this again, newly released games, even though imersive graphics, seem a little bit empty inside, and after countless patches to get the game you are actually paying for, is it really worth it. Even though i do enjoy the xbox one. What truly wins, the past or the present.

This industry is in a weird transition phase at the moment where developers and publishers are aiming to push visual and technological boundaries to their max, or even find those boundaries. This happens every time a new generation of console hardware pops up: everyone gets giddy over the fancy new tech and sort of loses the whole point of games.



Duard Mostert, "Inspired by Die Heuwels Fantasties – Deuntjies vir die Draaitafel vinyl design."

This is the best bit of fan created artwork we received at NAG this month. If you insert, use or create a piece of gaming artwork incorporating the NAG logo you might also end up here for your three lines of fame. Just don't go and stick the NAG logo on a picture and send it in because that is dumb and dumb people don't win things.



This month's prize courtesy of Prima Interactive is FIFA 15 for Xbox One.



I think that might be part of the reason why we're seeing so many HD re-releases and remasters: it's easy(-ish) to apply a new coat of paint to an old game and sell it, and it makes sense to consumers because now we can play our old favourites with all the pretty new stuff that modern games get in bucket loads. But this will get stale pretty soon, I reckon, and developers will get back to the business of innovating on the gameplay front, instead of just pushing more pixels. Of course there are always going to be the studios that push graphics above all else, but there is a market for that so these things won't ever go away.

Stay tuned over the course of the next year, I think we'll be in for a few treats. Ed.

From: Pieter van Schalkwyk
Subject: Funny funny

I suppose that using an inferior mouse as a mouse pad for your much more superior gaming mouse is the new form of "mine is bigger than yours".

(Ref. page 63, NAG Feb. 2015 issue; mouse mat with picture of Razer Gaming Mouse)

Love the mag. Kinda on the fence about the stapled spine.

I thought I'd print this because it's pretty funny. Yeah we screwed up. These things happen when we're under a lot of stress (which is kind of always, except the couple of days after we go to print). They also happen randomly, and then we have to find someone to blame and end up drawing straws to see who gets the lick of the whip. It's a nasty ritual,

really. RedTide was the source of this problem, if you're interested.

Thanks for pointing that out, and we're sorry that you're on a fence! That sounds really painful and you should probably choose one side or the other. Are you sitting or standing? Sitting is probably going to be a real pain the ass. Ed.

From: Maud
Subject: NAG artwork entry #1.pptx
...

Please never send us anything embedded in a PowerPoint document. PowerPoint is the Devil's tool and should be abolished from this planet. Thanks. Ed.

From: Ndzaba Mngomezulu
Subject: LOL

I know I'm not the only person who notices that this magazines comes with great humour. It's informative and funny. Serious is boring anyways, so I'm guessing if you're making a mag about games then being boring does not fit in. It's like if I went for an interview at your HQ I'd be asked whether I have a sense of humour. LOL. Thanks for keeping it real NAG!!

P.S. I think someone in the staff has a crush on Chloe Moretz (Hint: NAG January 2015 DVD Wallpapers) I don't blame him/her though

Thanks! We try to bugger about as much as possible, only squeezing in the required amount of work to put together this magazine. As it turns out, that's actually a lot of work, but we nonetheless spend a lot of time having fun, because, well, this is a

THE SHORTS

[extracts of LOL from the NAG audience]

"Can I just say that that was one heartfelt article Miklós wrote for this month. Keep up the great work!"
– Dylan Marais

"I was just sitting there thinking WTF and then realised I was being hacked!"
– Peter Wolmarans

"Was the PC worth the money? I don't think so."
– Louis Steyn

magazine about games. And games are fun (mostly). Even the bad games are fun, because then we get to write a scathing review – arguably the best part of this job.

PS: That'd be RedTide. Ed.

ON FACEBOOK

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Emilio Govender

You guys 'n this magazine rock, this is a really an interesting magazine that speaks my kinda language, keep up the good work.

Gideon Kotze

Oh magnificent leaders of all things gaming in southern most Africa, benevolent Lords and Lordettes of the great constellation of NAG Prime... Santa skipped my ass this year...

Bradley Jordan

Basic game-play in Sim City, when building more houses you need more power stations and not rely on the a few oldies. I think I should get President Zuma and Eskom a copy

Pieter Gouws

Oooo another next gen game? So that's about 30 to 40 gigs of game and what 50 gig of updates and bug fixes?

Michael Horn

Thanks for the poster. Been waiting for it for a long time. Hope every issue will have a poster inside in the new year. Happy new year!!



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THE GAME STALKER

by Pippa Tshabalala

Obsession



Pippa's childhood dream was to be the first astronaut to drive a car underwater. Why she chose such a specifically bizarre goal is part of the reason she was eventually institutionalised.

This is probably the most name appropriate piece (with regards to the title of my column) that I've written in a while. Any person who has been gaming for a significant amount of time will understand the occasional obsession that develops when you play a certain game a great deal. Whether it's *Call of Duty*, *Dragon Age* or *FIFA*, obsession rears its head in the weirdest places.

Actually... wait have I ever explained why my column is called The Game Stalker? No? Well apart from the obvious reason that I play a lot of video games and hence "stalk" them in the more literal sense of the word, it actually has to do with my name. You lot know me as Pippa Tshabalala as that's the name I was using when I started presenting, but in case there's any confusion, yes I know I'm white. In case it isn't immediately obvious (for some reason this is one of the questions I'm asked the most) I'm married, hence the fact that I have a Zulu surname.

My maiden name, however, is Stalker.

Yes I know it's weird. No I wasn't teased about it at school (although I'm not really sure why). Don't believe me? Feel free to Google it.

So, The Game Stalker. It makes sense now yes?

Ok, so speaking of obsession, or "stalking" (see what I did there?) have you ever been so obsessed with a game that every single thing that you do in the real world has an element of that game in there? For example, when the *Candy Crush* craze was going around, I had a number of people say to me that they could see *Candy Crush* combos in everything they did. You start seeing little sparkly gems and patterns in everything. Hearing the infernal music everywhere you go, permeating everything you do.

It's not just games like *Candy Crush* either. I once went through a phase when playing *Neverwinter Nights 2*, that I was constantly (even while working) thinking of character skills and levelling up. Of how to approach a certain fight scenario. Of which conversation option to use in order to get the response I wanted. See what I mean about obsessed? I wrote fan fiction, and became completely engrossed in the storyline and the multiple expansions. I think I must have replayed the game about three or four times (if that doesn't seem like a lot, think about the

number of hours it takes to play through that campaign without side missions let alone anything else) in order to maximise the number of relationships and alignments I could explore.

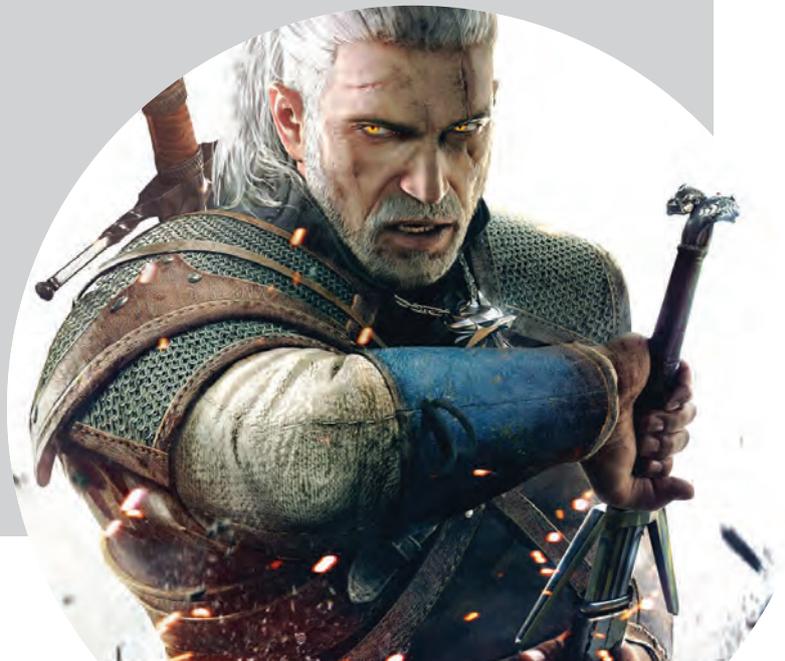
So you're wondering which contemporary game this is leading to?

I've never made any secret of my obsession with *The Witcher*, so let's be honest, you knew where this was going. And I stand by the fact that c'mon, I can't be obsessed with *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* as it hasn't been released yet ok! But, um *cough* that hasn't stopped me from re-playing *The Witcher*. And *The Witcher 2*. And *The Witcher 2* on Xbox 360. And reading all the books (the English translations of course, I'm not crazy!). Oh, and not only getting the soundtracks with the collector's editions of the games but actually putting them into my music library so I can listen to them while I'm working. And coercing a certain someone we all know into giving me his limited edition statue of Geralt, because as he said "you're way more into it than me."

I haven't quite gotten to the fan fiction stage here although honestly I think it's curbed by my lack of available time more than anything else. If I had even 25% less work then it's likely I would be spending it drawing fan art and writing stories about Geralt's exploits.

But what is it about video games that brings out our obsessive nature? And what is it that makes us all obsess over a different game? I honestly couldn't tell you but I won't deny I kind of love it. If a game is good enough for me to spend a good few months obsessively immersing myself in the lore and the characters, then it immediately makes it better than the games I played once and, even if I enjoyed them, ultimately blended into nothingness in my memory.

Call me crazy, but in this case I'm quite happy to embrace the name "The Game Stalker".



SOE sold, rebranded



In a surprise move, Sony Online Entertainment, developer of *PlanetSide 2* and *H1Z1*, has been acquired by Columbus Nova, and has also changed its name to Daybreak Game Company. This shift from former parent company Sony will essentially allow Daybreak to operate as an independent developer, allowing them to begin development for Xbox One and mobile platforms.

Sony's reasons for selling were quickly analysed, and it is believed the

move was made strategically as SOE games apparently didn't fit in with most PlayStation consumers. Analyst Lewis Ward theorised that Sony may be attempting to distance itself from the PC market, and focus more on home consoles.

How this move will affect upcoming games is unknown, but Daybreak president John Smedley took to Twitter to confirm "all of our games are still here and will continue to be."

The Bard's Tale

New Bard's Tale confirmed

The next instalment in the venerable but oft-forgotten *Bard's Tale* series was announced at the recent PAX South event by Brian Fargo of InXile Entertainment. Coming only to PC, the game is touted as a dungeon-crawler that blends

familiar lore and aspects of the series with modern visuals. InXile were also responsible for the well received but non-canon game of the same name, as well as the recent *Wasteland 2*. No more details have emerged, except for a 2015 launch window.



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He doesn't like people talking about it, but Miklós was born with only four toes. On his feet, anyway. The missing toes started sprouting on his shoulders as he grew older. Look closely and you'll spot them.

PIXEL FIX

by Miklós Szecsei

I'm Star-Lord, man

I had to alt+TAB out to start playing the MP3, but it just seemed like such an apt thing to do, blasting The Raspberries' *Go All The Way* as my Sidewinder was raised up onto landing platform no. 34, deep inside the cavernous innards of the Ocellus-type, Gidzenko Ring station. The station hung in orbit above the one planet that circled the Chamunda system's twin suns. I was about to make my first cargo run: a modest four units of food that were required in an outpost about three solar systems away from Gidzenko Ring station. The pay wasn't that much, but then again the job wasn't too difficult. I needed that easy start; I needed a job that required little concentration so that I might give my full attention to actually piloting this Sidewinder.

Gidzenko's tower cleared my ship from the platform, and the docking release hissed and clanked as my Sidewinder bobbed upwards, reacting ever so slightly to the lack of gravity inside the station's docking area. Thrusters at 10%; landing gear retracted; the narrow airlock opening dead ahead; The Raspberries hit their epic guitar riff as my ship hummed passed newcomers entering the station, and I blasted out into deep space.

Oh yeah, I'm freakin' Star-Lord, man.

Elite: Dangerous has its claws so deep in my psyche that I'm battling to focus on much else. In terms of contemporary gaming, *Elite: Dangerous* is a dull title. It lacks variety and that constant metronome of action sequence after action sequence that punctuates the titles dominating the present gaming landscape. But I love it.

I love it because this is the closest I'll ever get to being Han Solo or Peter Quill. *Elite: Dangerous* is a game for the dorkiest of science-fiction nerds who have longed to bounce from system to system in a space ship that they've grown to love. Well, love for as long as it takes to get the money to buy something better.

Elite: Dangerous has a reputation for being a hard nut to crack; the shell is practically made out of titanium, and the developers have given you a toothpick to get the job done. That's turned a lot of people off. The game offers very little in terms of tutorials that will actually help you progress. It'll teach you the basics of how to fly and how to try to stay alive when people start shooting at you, but there are layers; systems under systems that lie hidden from the beginner. It's a game you have to *learn*. There's no hand-holding to speak of, but why should there be in deep space?

The universe of *Elite: Dangerous* feels like it's always been there; it feels like it carries on without you, and that it doesn't give a damn if you fail again and again. But as I punch through the void with my hyper-drive humming, and I get to look out above me into the endless expanse of space – suddenly I am every science-fiction hero I ever loved while growing up.

Dying Light developers make modders comfortable



Despite some initial concerns that *Dying Light* would declare user-created content anathema, Techland has assured fans and players that they mean to include a full-fledged, official modding kit in the foreseeable future.

This comes after a patch was released that rendered mods unplayable, and several copyright infringement notices were issued to sites hosting mods. Techland has indicated these notices were sent out in error by 3rd-party vendors and has already set up a forum for users to continue discussing mod ideas.

"Modders were a massive part of our gaming community since *Call of Juarez 2* and *Dead Island* — and we wish to continue that with *Dying Light*," Techland said in its statement. "This invitation is only the first stage of our cooperation with the gaming community. After the modding tools are released, we plan to actively support the coolest mods created by players."

Activision published three of the five top selling games of 2014



Can you guess which ones? Nah don't worry, we'll just tell you - it'll be easier. *Destiny*, *Skylanders: Trap Team* and (of course) *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*. Are you surprised? Didn't think so. Activision announced that these three games were among the top five titles that sold the most copies throughout 2014. In addition to this, Activision has revealed that *Destiny* and *Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft* raked in \$850 million for the publisher during 2014. *Hearthstone*, if you're wondering, has more than 25 million registered players.

Ken Levine hints at his next project



You simply can't mention the name Ken Levine without instantly grabbing our attention. *The BioShock* creator recently revealed (via Twitter) some very tantalising details about the upcoming, yet-to-be-revealed project that he and his team have been working on since the dramatic downsizing of Irrational Games – which transpired because Levine was ready to focus on smaller, narrative-led games with a high degree of replayability.

Based on his enigmatic tweets, we know that the new game takes place in an entirely new universe and is rooted in science fiction (or

something “sci-fi ish”, as he puts it). It'll feature a small “open worldish (but not necessarily outdoors) rpg” design and promises to be highly replayable, with Levine making reference to how *Civilization* expansion packs add in extra content and alter the existing game without fundamentally changing the overall experience as a method for growing the narrative possibilities within the game organically after its launch. At the moment development is geared towards PC, and it's played from a first-person perspective. Call us obsessed, but we can't help but think *System Shock* whenever Ken Levine and science fiction are in the same room.

Montreal's EA branch gets laid off

EA Montreal seems to be in a bit of a pickle. They've allegedly laid off a number of employees from the province of Quebec, but details remain cagey. “We made a staffing change in our Montreal studio to align with our current development and service plans,” EA said in a statement that conflicted claims by other sources close to the company. It seems possible that the Montreal branch may well be closing, meaning that EA might consider shifting focus away from its mobile division.

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Avengers assemble all-female roster

Welcome, True Believers!



In preparation for the new upcoming Secret Wars story arc beginning in May, Marvel has announced that a new Avengers team will consist solely of super-heroines. As announced recently on *The View*, the new team will be called A-Force and stars female superheroes from all corners of the Marvel universe. Currently confirmed for the roster are She-Hulk, Wasp, Storm, Rogue, Elektra, Black Widow, at least one incarnation of Captain Marvel, and many others. A brand new cosmic character called The Singularity will also join the ranks, and other new characters may follow.

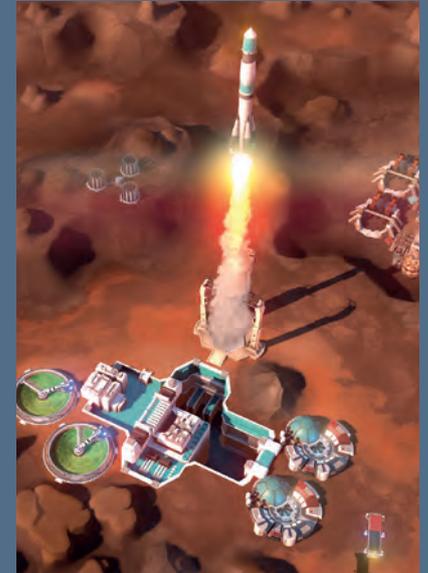
According to the announcement, every team of Avengers will be disbanding and replaced by the A-Force. How or why remains unclear, and it is also unclear whether or not the A-Force will remain after the events of Secret Wars conclude. *A-Force* is also bringing some serious creative credentials to the table. Co-writing will be G. Willow Wilson

and Marguerite Bennett, writers of *Ms. Marvel* and *Angela: Asgard's Assassin* respectively. Art will be handled by Jorge Molina, known for his work with the *X-Men* series.

According to Wilson, diversity is key to the series. She said they've "purposefully assembled a team composed of very different characters — from disparate parts of the Marvel U, with very different power sets, identities and ideologies." Besides this new team, Marvel has received good attention over the past year for their attempts to improve the diversity of their characters, ranging from a Muslim *Ms. Marvel* to a female Thor.

Marvel's female characters also tend to have the most dangerous powers, ranging from reality-alteration (Scarlet Witch and the House of M arc) to galactic annihilation (Dark Phoenix). Needless to say, it will be interesting to see what this team of powerhouses will get up to, and to see what fan-fiction will result.

Offworld Trading Company's combat-free real-time strategy



Mohawk Games (the studio founded by *Civilization IV*'s lead designer Soren Johnson) has finally let slip a flurry of new information about its economically-driven real-time strategy title *Offworld Trading Company*. The idea behind it is to strip away all the traditionally military-centric mechanics of other RTS games, and make the trade and industry side of the game more exciting. To that end, players must establish a colony on Mars and outplay their competitors via various economic means, producing in-demand goods and manipulating trade markets to maximise the effectiveness of their strategies and eventually buy out their competition.

Playable by up to eight players, you'll have to establish resource collection, monitor the market (which is affected by player actions) and adjust your strategies accordingly. Mohawk uses the examples of one player manufacturing and selling too much water, driving the price of it down and making it tough to turn a profit, or if there's suddenly a food shortage, any player with access to food can charge hefty premiums for it. There will be some underhanded options in play as well, like the ability to hire pirates who'll shut down enemy trade routes and steal resources. Obviously, the real challenge will be ensuring that all this corporate espionage is as exciting as marching armies around and blowing things up, but it's undoubtedly an intriguing prospect.

The Sims 4 to get first expansion pack in April

Dubbed *Get to Work*, the first expansion for last September's *The Sims 4* is set to be released in April of this year. The expansion will bring three new career paths for your Sims to pursue: the scientist, doctor, and police detective. That alone isn't exactly expansion-worthy, so it's a good thing that Maxis and EA are adding workplace gameplay as well. Yes, for the first time in this long-running series' history, players will be able to control their Sims while they're at work. This new workplace gameplay will only be available for these three new career paths, but Maxis hasn't ruled out adding working environments for already existing career paths found in the base game.

For players not too interested in those three careers, the *Get to Work* expansion will include the option for your Sim to open their own shop. This shop will be completely customizable via the Build Mode, and you'll be able to sell anything from books and pastries to clothing and art.

So, we guess if your Sims want hot bodies, Bugattis, and Maseratis, they'd better *Get to Work*, bitch. Yeah, we... we heard that somewhere.



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Valve disqualifies CS:GO players ahead of European tournament issues warning to community

“Professional players... should under no circumstances gamble on CS:GO matches.”



Valve has disqualified three teams of *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* players from competing in the upcoming ESL One Katowice 2015 tournament. The disqualifications and player bans come in the wake of instances of confirmed match fixing by players in CS:GO teams Winner, Epsilon eSports, and ESC Gaming.

No less than 14 CS:GO players have been banned from participating in any future Valve-sponsored events. According to Valve, these restrictions are “indefinite” and won’t be re-evaluated until at least 2016. A further five players are barred from further participation in pre-Katowice qualifiers as they are currently under investigation.

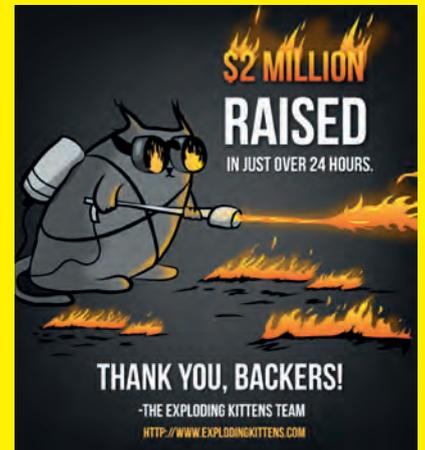
“Professional players, teams, and anyone involved in the production of CS:GO events, should under no circumstances gamble on CS:GO matches,” Valve said in a statement on the official *Counter-Strike* blog. “As a professional player, team manager or event production staff, it is common to have personal

relationships and/or privileged information about other teams and players. Because of this, we will always assume that you have access to private CS:GO-related “inside information” that might give you an unfair advantage when placing a bet on any CS:GO game or match.”

Valve is obviously warning all professionals involved in CS:GO tournaments not to bet on any matches. The company reminded players that when competing in tournaments, there are millions of CS:GO fans watching, and that while professionals are competing, they are essentially ambassadors for the game.

With Winner, Epsilon eSports, and ESC Gaming disqualified, Valve announced a “last chance tournament” for other CS:GO teams that were defeated by Epsilon and ESC Gaming in the previous Katowice 2015 qualifying tournament. As for Winner’s spot for the upcoming offline European qualifier, that has been handed to two teams LGB eSports and 3DMAX.

Exploding Kittens breaks Kickstarter records



Exploding Kittens is a recently announced competitive card game (best described as Russian Roulette with [not actual. Ed] exploding cats) currently in development by Elan Lee, Shane Small, and Matthew Inman (of *The Oatmeal*). In late January, the card game started a Kickstarter campaign with a very modest goal of \$10,000. Within an hour, the goal was met. Within seven hours, \$1 million was pledged. After three days, they had \$3 million worth of pledgers. By the time you read this, the Kickstarter campaign would have closed with at least \$6 million in pledges. All for a card game with cats.

All this money quickly secured *Exploding Kittens* as the most-funded game and card game of all time. Shortly after it rose to claim the title of campaign with the most number of backers, as well as the highest-earning campaign.

Exploding Kittens is set to launch worldwide this July and, despite the grim themes of kitten explosions, it looks utterly adorable.

Nintendo looking to take a leaf out of Apple's book with cheap games for 3DS



Apple's App Store is synonymous with 0.99c apps and games. The "pile them high, sell them cheap" mentality has certainly proved a lucrative one for many app developers, and it looks like Nintendo might be following suit. Company president Satoru Iwata has confirmed that Nintendo will be looking to bring older titles to the 3DS, but sell them for as little as a few hundred yen (¥100 is about R10). The objective is to stimulate a software uptake boom on Nintendo's mobile devices, which have a colossal user-base as it is already. Nintendo

also hopes that pushing cheaper, downloadable legacy titles will keep Nintendo franchises in the minds of players, who will then go on to buy newer versions of those same IPs.

In keeping with their goal to return to profits, Nintendo looks like it'll be releasing a set of gold and silver amiibo figures. The amiibo characters are already selling phenomenally well the world over, so Nintendo's plans to release silver and gold variants of more popular figures will likely cause collection completionists to splurge even more.

Prepare for pointing, shmupping, clicking and adventuring in Starr Mazer



In possibly one of the most bizarre genre crossovers in gaming history, *Starr Mazer* combines the slow, methodical puzzling of 2D point-and-click adventures with the frantic bullet-dodging mayhem of shoot-'em-ups. Its developers promise a seamless world that isn't cleanly divided into adventure segments, shmup segments and cut-scenes – instead, everything will blend together, so there'll be elements of both genres interweaved with one another.

The devs say that *Starr Mazer* will be highly replayable, with what they call an open-middled gameplay (OMG!, they call it) narrative that responds to your choices and adapts the plot (and a number of different endings) to suit your play style. The shmup sequences are dynamic, adjusting their scale and difficulty depending on the circumstances. Players take on the role of Brick M. Stonewood, whose ship – the *Starr Wolf* – can be upgraded as you progress. It's all wrapped up in an attractive retro aesthetic too.

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“Swatting” gamers becomes an alarming trend

Online viewers with unclear motives call law enforcement on gaming sessions



Remember the good days when you could play an online game without fears that some government taskforce would break into your room?

Joshua Peters is one of the latest victims in a series of hoaxes concerning falsely informing a SWAT team to infiltrate a gamer's house during a play session. The air force veteran was playing *RuneScape* with his brothers and streaming the game via Twitch. While about 60,000 people were watching, his house was raided and guns were pointed at him and his siblings.

“I see you posting my address.” Peters later says on his stream. “I had police point a gun at my little brothers because of you. They could have been shot, they could have died because you chose to SWAT my stream. I don't give a s*** about what you have against me, or what

I did to you. For that, I am at a loss for words. Your gripe is with me so let it be with me and do not involve my family in any way, shape or form with this. They don't deserve that.”

He also elaborated that he couldn't think of a reason why anybody in particular would have a gripe with him. Nonetheless, he's taken the experience as a precautionary warning: “It was more or less a wake-up call that I have to be careful. It can happen to anybody,” he said. “I came back on after and told everyone what was going on. I knew the person who did it was watching and I wanted to let them know you can't do this.”

Gamers will recall that a similar occurrence happened last year, when a disgruntled *Counter-Strike* player called a SWAT team to take out a rival.

Treyarch developing next CoD

In a recent tweet from Treyarch Studios, the American company announced that they would be releasing the next instalment of *Call of Duty*. This marks it as their first CoD to be developed in the series' new three year development cycle. In an interview, Treyarch stated that “it will be loaded with innovation, and we're excited to share more details with our community soon”.

No word on story or setting, or if it will continue the events of previous Treyarch games, but the title is expected to launch in November.



Disney is making a show about gamers

In a recent press release, Disney announced *A Gamer's Guide to Pretty Much Everything*, a live-action comedy series set to air on the Disney XD channel. It stars Cameron Boyce as a 15 year-old retired pro-gamer (dreadful thumb injury) who is forced to return to high school. He reunites with old friends, and doubtlessly shenanigans will ensue. Adam Bonnett of Disney went on to say: “We are bringing the video game universe to life and giving our popular multi-camera series a fresh, new twist by integrating gaming visual effects into each episode.”

The series is expected to launch sometime in mid-2015.

Warhammer: The End Times - Vermintide is Left 4 Ratmen



Video games based on the Warhammer table-top strategy game are popping up everywhere. There's now another one, with the very long-winded name of *Warhammer: The End Times - Vermintide*. It's described by Swedish developer Fatshark (*War of the Vikings, Krater*) as a “co-operative action first person shooter and melee combat adventure set in the End Times of the iconic Warhammer Fantasy universe”.

It sees the city of Ubersreik under siege by a relentless horde of deadly Skaven (a race of rat-people), and players are able to select one of five powerful heroes (each with their own abilities, gear and personalities) to play as, working together with their friends and leveraging their character's unique traits to fend off the invasion. Obvious comparisons can be drawn to the *Left 4 Dead* series, and *Vermintide* will apparently also feature an AI director that dynamically adjusts the action based on your performance. The game's due out in the second half of this year on PC, PS4 and Xbox One.



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Condemned 3? YES PLEASE.

The future of Condemned is in our hands



Jason “Jace” Hall, the founder and former CEO of Monolith Productions (creators of *F.E.A.R.* and *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*), has openly asked on Facebook whether or not people would be at all interested in playing a third game in the *Condemned* series (since Hall still retains the rights to it), and more intriguingly he’s asked if any developers out there would be interested in actually making *Condemned 3*. Our natural response is: do you even have to ask?

“Since I am focused on other things, and will be for quite some time, this franchise is just sitting there,” writes Hall. “I am contemplating finding an interested and proven Indie development team AND PROVIDING IT TO THEM, so that they can take over the franchise

and move it forward. As an indie, it can be very hard to get marketing/media attention for a title that you work on. This franchise is already quite known, has market demand, and is in an innovative genre/category.”

If you’re not familiar with the series, it’s a super-creepy psychological horror played from a first-person viewpoint and filled to bursting with brutal, bloody melee combat. *Condemned: Criminal Origins* still stands as one of the scariest games we’ve ever played, and its sequel *Bloodshot* is every bit as unnervingly psychotic as its forebear. They’re both excellent games built around wonderfully grotesque design sensibilities, and we’d very much like to play another one – especially one that’s free of the reins of AAA publishers.

Destiny and Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor clean up at the 18th annual DICE Awards

Bungie’s *Destiny* and Monolith’s *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* have cleaned up at the 2015 DICE Awards. Between the two of them, Bungie and Monolith made off with just over 50% of the awards for the evening: a total of 12 out of 23. *Destiny* won for sound design, musical score, online play, and Action Game of the Year. *Shadow of Mordor* made off with many, including Adventure Game of the Year, Outstanding Achievement in Game Design, innovation, and animation. The DICE Game of the Year, however, was bagged by BioWare for *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.



Reptile and Ermac for MK:X

We’ve been treated to the addition of two staple fan favourites for *Mortal Kombat*: Reptile and Ermac. Our scaly reptilian friend is as repulsive as ever, spitting acid and grabbing foes with his prehensile tongue. Ermac on the other hand can’t seem to get over the fact that he’s just a haphazardly-constructed fusion of souls, but it’s okay, we can forgive him. Even more old-time favourites are hinted to reappear, making this sequel truly a piece of fan service.



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A role-playing classic reborn

More information surfaces on Ultima Underworld's successor



A few months back we reported that Paul Neurath – Looking Glass founder and original designer of *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* – and his new studio OtherSide Entertainment are hard at work developing a spiritual successor to the classic *Ultima Underworld* franchise. A Kickstarter campaign has revealed it to be called *Underworld Ascendant*, and it's once again a first-person role-playing experience. Licensing issues prevent it from using the *Ultima Underworld* title, but it nevertheless aims to capture the spirit of its ancestors in myriad ways, while employing all the modern-day enhancements we've come to expect.

Players will once again assume the role of "the Avatar", who travels to an underground fantasy world filled with monsters, magic and danger. You'll be able to customise your character's attributes as you see fit, and there'll be

three main factions (dark elves, dwarves and shamblers) to interact with in *The Stygian Abyss*, gaining and losing favour with them depending on your actions. The damp-loving shamblers, for example, will be particularly pleased if you flood a dry area and help them expand their territory.

It promises a rich, visually engaging world of underground rivers, ancient temples, awe-inspiring dwarven halls, deadly tombs and more. You'll encounter lively subterranean societies and meet fascinating characters, and every choice you make in it will forge a unique narrative. Many dangerous foes roam the caverns of the abyss, and the game's Improvisation Engine will offer various ways to approach and overcome any given obstacle using your character's unique skills – you could attack foes head-on, for example, or you could use the environment in clever ways to find more subtle solutions.

Caption of the month



Every month we'll choose a screenshot from a random game and

write a bad caption for it. Your job is to come up with a better one. The winner will get a copy of ***Crime & Punishments: Sherlock Holmes*** for Xbox One from Apex Interactive. Send your captions to letters@nag.co.za with the subject line "**March caption**".



NAG'S LAME ATTEMPT AT HUMOUR

"Where we're going we don't need roads!"



LAST MONTH'S WINNER

"Looks like a murder ooo a penny"
- Ryan Fourie



SUPPORT LINES

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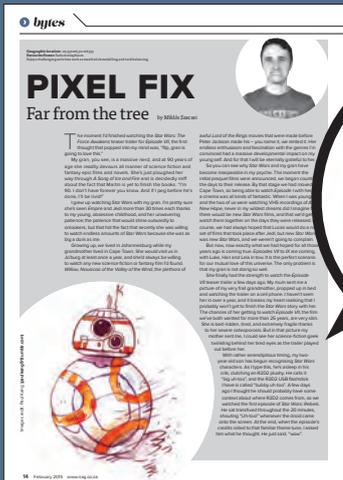
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July winner
Tristan Carlyon, page 14

This month's prize

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Rumour has it Nintendo and Netflix are about to create a live-action Zelda TV series

File this under "R" for Rumour for now, but Netflix and Nintendo are apparently in talks to develop a Netflix Originals series based on the *The Legend of Zelda* intellectual property. Evidently the show will be aiming for a "family friendly" take on *Game of Thrones*, set in Hyrule. And probably with less incest, betrayal and boobs, and a little more cheer, heroism and family values.

Neither Nintendo or Netflix are commenting on the rumour, so don't get excited just yet.



OlliOlli hits Xbox One, Wii U and 3DS

The hit 2D skateboarding-themed side-scroller that originated on the Vita is set to grow its install base by including new versions for the Xbox One, Wii U and 3DS game systems. Players will have to utilise countless tricks in a hundred levels and even more challenges.

In addition, the developer has announced a sequel that will be released on the PS4 and Vita later this year. Titled *OlliOlli2: Welcome To Olliwood*, the game is set to introduce a more powerful level editor and dozens of new moves and combos. Although not yet confirmed, we can expect ports to other platforms such as the PC once released.



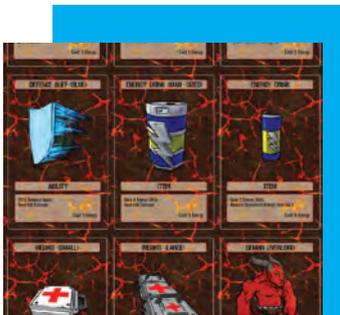
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EXPOSURE FOR SOUTH AFRICAN INDIE DEVELOPERS

by Rodain Joubert

Son of the ancient god Ba'hatma-nut and founder of the Netherlands, Rodain is incredibly passionate about the colour orange. He's actually got a tattoo of the word orange on his lower back, but oddly enough the tattoo's blue.

“What do we do now?”



The Global Game Jam is a yearly 48-hour game development competition where participants find courage in the face of extreme time adversity. It's probably the jam event that South Africans most participate in – with dedicated venues, scheduled unveilings and all the other fun little trappings and rituals which help build an atmosphere around manic game creation.

South African developers produced 25 entries this year, under the theme “What do we do now?” The full list can be found at the official Global Game Jam site (globalgamejam.org/2015/games). Not all of the games are complete works (and in one or two more polite cases, the games themselves actually apologise for their brokenness), but there's a few of them in particular I'd like other creatives to look at. Don't worry, I'll give you reasons and *everything*.

BEING PARTY-READY: *SUPER MASSIVE CRATE DASH*

One of the optional challenges in this year's jam involved making a game where any spectator automatically becomes a player as well. This is tackled heartily in *Super Massive Crate Dash*, which describes itself as a “massively multiplayer” infinite runner. Any number of players can join a single game session by pressing down on the key of their choice. It eventually gets a little cramped around one keyboard, but that's kinda fun in itself.

There have been a few cool trends in local game development recently. One of them has been the sudden popularity of indie game parties, as well as a general increase in the number of South African expos. Making a good party game nowadays can afford you a pretty ready audience – on its most rewarding level, you can even draw in people who “aren't really gamers” (whatever *that* means).

SMCD's simple gameplay and cute, colourful art also lends it a pick-up-and-play feel that's so vital in these environments. Your goals and abilities are immediately apparent, and for anyone who's played an infinite runner before, the instructions are barely necessary.

NON-DIGITAL GAMES: *BEAST BRAWLER*

One of the nice things about recent Global Game Jam events is the openness towards participants designing things like board and card games (even simple physical activities are allowed as entries, provided that the rules are clear). This is probably one of the most encouraging elements of the jam, as it allows people to get involved with absolutely no specialised experience (programming literacy, I'm looking at you).

There were quite a few non-digital games this year, but the one which caught my eye for ever-so-shallow reasons was an augmented reality card game called *Beast Brawler*. This game was built to satisfy GGJ's “Chimera”



diversity challenge (making a game that was a digital hybrid). In addition to featuring the design and art talent of several GGJ regulars, this card game provides 3D models of all units and resources when viewed through a chosen AR device. Sadly, the executable download on GGJ's site was having problems at the time of writing, but the developers have a video showing what they achieved in that time and it's pretty sweet if you're interested in local examples of AR.

SOLID STYLE: **BODYBAG**

It probably says something that I find it almost impossible to *not* mention Steven Tu's work in roundup pieces. You may remember hearing about the creator of *Dead Run* a couple of times and yep, *Bodybag* is another of his projects. This guy's always involved, always trying something new and always doing it in some wacky, gorgeous style. It's a little bit scary. But well-presented.

The game involves two "cleaners" cooperating to move a morbid bundle from the scene of the crime to... well, anywhere that makes it more difficult for the authorities to gather evidence. It can be played by a single person, but the design calls for two players to take the wheel, grab opposite ends of the grim bag and move/jump/shuffle awkwardly with one another to achieve objectives and negotiate platforming obstacles.

Hilarity ensues, with a good balance of gameplay experience, art, moody music and various other touches which made this feel like one of the more "complete" game experiences of the jam. Always a pleasure.

CLEVERNESS AWARD: **SWINE FLEW**

Here's the honest deal about a lot of jammed games: a lot of them aren't necessarily fun. Or even complete. The environment is largely about creativity and experimentation and often people will throw themselves into the deep end with that, generating something which provokes more conversation than repeated playtime.

So it's nice when the occasional jam entry focuses on something simple, fun, and mechanically elegant in the time provided. A game experience which feels well-balanced and intended for actual play instead of novelty.

Swine Flew is perhaps best described as a *Balloon Fight*-esque multiplayer game where you take control of various inflatable pigs who need to breathe in and out to control floatiness and avoid obstacles. The more buoyant or inflated a pig is, the bigger they are. And this makes them an easier target. An elegant premise with a positive result.

"SHUT UP AND DEVELOP": **INEVITABLE**

As a jam entry, *Inevitable* is kinda nice. It's a charming little text adventure with some simple graphic scenes and an unusual fixation

on cupcakes. Plus a sprinkling of mystery and only a few bugs to work around. It's also made in Twine.

I think Twine is neat and don't write nearly enough about it. It's basically a nonlinear storytelling tool, popular in places like the interactive fiction community, and publishes directly to HTML. It's been around for a while now. There's no coding, no hassle, and none of this dubious "programmer logic" that keeps cropping up when people talk about making video games. Unless, of course, you decide to dig in a little deeper.

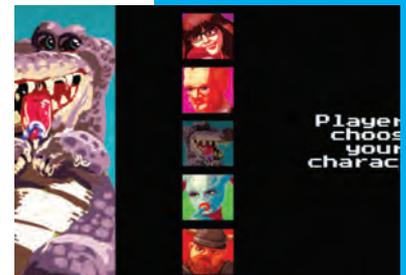
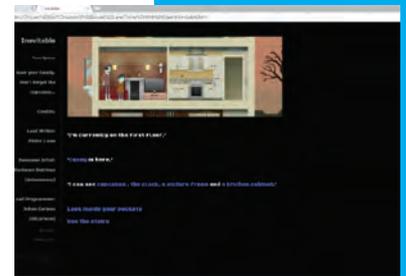
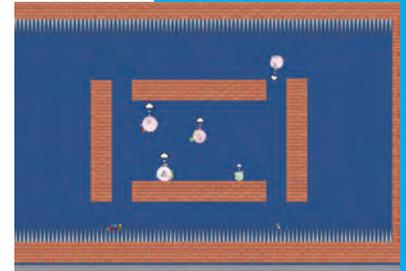
Enjoy telling stories? Want to put them into a video game? Think you'll only have about 48 hours in which to do it? You can get right on that with Twine. Just do it.

(DIS)HONOURABLE MENTION: **RULE 34**

What would any indie game jam be without a touch of bizarre or deliberately unsettling work? While exploring the SA entries on the GGJ website, you *may* come across this saucy little entry. You'll *probably* realise what the developers had in mind. You *will* want to keep this away from the kids. And you'll *certainly* wonder what sort of twisted imaginations brought this game into existence.

Using various... tools, players need to make their partner feel... amused. The tools in question can get rather... exotic.

It's actually a really good laugh if you decide to play, and the extra cheesy music and sound effects seal the deal. As a bonus: the game is totally banting-friendly [*How... what? Ed*]. Which is, you know, kinda nice as long as you don't think about it too hard.



WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR II

Oh hey! It's The Other Guys! Our ongoing, hilariously sporadic feature in which we attempt to diversify the range of games we play in the NAG office. In other words, it's a feature centred on wrapping our brains around a bunch of things that aren't *StarCraft II*. It's been a while since we've done one of these, but this month we've had a sudden hankering to lose ourselves in a real-time strategy game that's happy to carve its own unique path, one that exists outside the constraints of traditional RTS mechanics. An RTS that eschews base building and high unit counts in favour of careful micromanagement of small squads of elite units. An RTS called *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II*.

In case you've never heard of (nor played, obviously) this lovely thing before, here's what you need to know: it's awesome. As mentioned above, its flow is unlike that of most RTS games, because instead of carefully setting up a base, slowly gathering resources to amass a powerful army and then heading out for a big old bash-up with your opponent(s), *Dawn of War II* removes base management almost entirely, placing all of its focus on your various units – their strengths, their weaknesses and how effectively you're able to utilise them to maintain control of the battlefield. This has the natural effect of making *Dawn of War II* a faster, more tactically dynamic, and in many ways far more brutal real-time strategy experience than you're likely to get from more conventional RTS fare. There's no flipping back and forth between your base and the battlefield – your attention is almost always on the frontline, on the action, all the time. Assuming your base hasn't become the battlefield because it's being overrun, of course.

FOR THE EMPEROR!

There are three main ways to play it. There's a campaign mode, which can be tackled either solo or cooperatively with a friend. Competitive skirmishes can be set up with the AI or other players, catering for nail-biting one-on-one duels or chaotic team-based matches. Finally, there's The Last Stand, a Horde mode-style offering wherein you choose a hero and team up with two other players to fend off wave after wave of increasingly tough foes in a small arena. The base game comes packing four factions: Space Marines, Eldar, Orks and Tyranids. A pair of expansion packs (the first named *Chaos Rising* and the second *Retribution*) add two more playable races to the fray: the Chaos Space Marines and the Imperial Guard.

Savage and RedTide abhor new things, so the responsibility of having a great time with *Dawn of War II* fell upon me and GeometriX. We shied away from competitive skirmishes, mostly because we didn't feel like being torn apart by random Internet peoples with superior *Dawn of War* skills relative to our noob-ish fumbling. The Last Stand was the real reason we wanted to dive back into the game, and we're happy to report that it's still tons of fun. The way it works is that you're given the choice of a number of different hero characters representing the game's different races. Each of them has their own starting abilities and potential upgrade paths – the melee-focused Space Marine Captain is introduced as a meaty tank, able to absorb loads of abuse, but incapable of dealing as much damage as some of the other characters initially. The ranged Ork Mekboy, meanwhile, can be geared up to trade health for damage output, mowing down scores of enemies before they even reach him and





then quickly teleporting away when any survivors eventually catch up to him.

With each game of *The Last Stand* that's played, you gain experience points for your chosen character, and as they level up you'll unlock new gear and abilities with which to customise your role on the battlefield at the start of each game. Higher-level Mekboys can be customised to explode spectacularly on death, dealing massive damage to any foes caught in the blast. Captains unlock jump packs that are useful for quickly traversing the small arenas (there are two of them, although the second can only be played if you own the *Retribution* expansion), and can even summon a powerful Space Marine Dreadnought to fight alongside them. *The Last Stand* is supposedly designed in such a way that low-level characters can be every bit as effective as their high-level counterparts, but have fewer options in how to play – although we're not sure how true this really is, given that it definitely seems to become more manageable with the high-level trinkets.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of *The Last Stand* is that each arena is limited to 20 predefined waves. You always know what to expect, and there's always a finish line in sight, with no option for endless, randomised survival. There is, however, substantial emphasis on setting high scores. Capturable points on the map provide score bonuses (you'll have to ensure that the enemy doesn't sneakily capture these while you're not paying attention), and each wave that you survive awards you with score points buffed by a multiplier that tracks how well you're doing. It's an impressively fun game mode, and it's augmented by *Dawn of War II*'s chunky and immensely satisfying



THE REDTIDE PERSPECTIVE

Dane and Geoff were trying to convince me to buy this *Dawn of Chaos 40,000 Warhammers* thing. I think there might also be a “K” in the title somewhere and maybe a “Part Two” as well. The names they’ve given these games are all very confusing, but the thing you need to take away from this is that they sure were trying hard to bait and hook me into buying it. I later found out all the effort was so that I could provide them with a third reliable network anchor point. Seeing that nobody in the country is currently playing whatever they were playing, they were forced to join laggy international games – something we all hate. If the naming of this series was perhaps simpler and there were less expansions and instances of “you have to have this for that to work” I might have humoured them and bought it, but I like my gaming nice and simple.

In the end, all I did was watch them play. It looked pretty and sounded mean but all I really ended up learning from the experience was that you can’t have fun playing it with lag. You can also get new guns and stuff if you win and apparently *StarCraft*’s stuff is based on stuff in this universe. So that’s my experience in not playing it and I hope this is at least somewhat helpful to someone out there. If you found this boxout a waste of time don’t blame me: instead split the blame equally between the other guys in the office.



combat: the screen constantly shakes with the explosive force of battles, smoke and dust and comical ragdoll bodies are often sent soaring through the air, powerful detonations leave gaping craters in the ground and any cover on the map is gradually obliterated by the chaos unfolding onscreen. Now’s probably as good a time as any to mention that cover in *Dawn of War* is enormously important. Units can hide behind different types of cover that afford varying amounts of protection against ranged attacks, which means that when all the cover on the map disappears, your chance of survival dwindles.

BY HIS WILL

Playing through the campaign cooperatively is unexpectedly enjoyable, given that neither of us had attempted to play it cooperatively before. *Dawn of War II*’s campaign is well worth playing solo (as are the campaigns of its expansions), but playing it cooperatively feels pleasantly natural given its structure. You only have access to a handful of squads, and can only take up to four of them on any given excursion – meaning each player is able to choose and control two squads. Missions are short and frantic, often offering a number of different paths to traverse, and

splitting up to explore areas of the map independently works nicely, reuniting again whenever large battles (or boss fights) make it necessary. Enemies occasionally drop Wargear used to outfit your squads between missions, and various attributes can be upgraded and abilities unlocked as your soldiers earn experience. In many ways it feels like an action RPG, and it has a similarly rewarding feedback loop. Also, it allows you to accidentally drop artillery barrages on buildings your buddy has garrisoned with friendly squads, insta-killing any troops within and leading to heaps of hilarious, horrified confusion – and that’s pretty much the best thing ever [Yes, thanks again for that. Ed].

Recommending *Dawn of War II* is easy. It’s packed with interesting features (like suppression mechanics, strikingly detailed death animations and the ability to reinforce squads), it asserts vast tactical depth despite moving at a blistering pace, and it still looks mighty attractive even though it’s just over six years old. If you already own it, now’s the time to dust off those digital cobwebs and load it up again. If you’ve never played it, you should fix that, right now. Digital stores often put it on sale for ridiculously low prices, and I can think of at least several million reasons why you shouldn’t think twice about adding it to your collection. **NAG**

– Barkskin

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Guild Wars 2: Heart of Thorns

Expanding to the jungle

It's been two years since the launch of *Guild Wars 2*. The highly successful (and lucrative, according to its developers) action-MMORPG is finally getting the first of presumably several expansions. Until now, content additions to the game have arrived in the form of experimental "Living World" episodes. These free patches moved the world along, progressed the plot past the "Personal Story" phase, and introduced new characters and stories. The first season was temporary, a "you had to be there for that" structure that was marvellous *if* you were around for it. It told the story of an insane Sylvari who, through a series of events, awoke the elder dragon Mordremoth. Season 2 of the

Living World just finished, its eight episode arc is replayable, permanent content. The season ended with the Pact Fleet (formed during your Personal Story) attempting a pre-emptive strike against the dragon in the jungles of Maguuma. The fleet was destroyed, massive tendrils erupting from the ground, swatting the ships out of the air, thus setting the stage for the expansion.

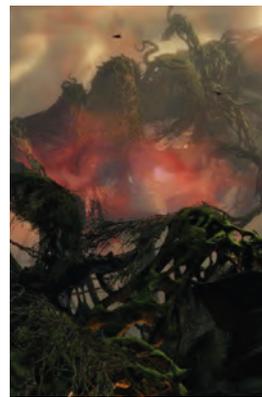
THE HEART OF MAGUUMA

The expansion will feature an entirely new region spread across multiple open world jungle maps. There will be a lot of verticality to the new zones, which include the dense jungle floor, the root system of the jungle itself, and the massive canopy far above. The zones will have Outposts that function as centralised hubs that evolve over time: a more expanded version of how the Pact Forts in the Silverwastes can be retaken by Mordrem, forcing players to fight through and wrestle back control. Outposts will feature adventures – repeatable

"The expansion will also include new events, storylines, boss battles, group content, reworked progression systems, and a new profession."



❶ No price point has been revealed for the expansion yet, but our guess would be \$40 (R460) or cheaper.



on-demand challenges with leaderboards that groups of players (or guilds) can attempt. ArenaNet is expected to show more on how these adventures look and work soon. The expansion will also include new events, storylines, boss battles, group content, reworked progression systems and even a new profession.

THE MASTERY SYSTEM

Because the level cap of 80 will not be raised in the expansion, ArenaNet instead is focusing on what they call their Mastery System. This account-based progression uses Mastery Points – unlocked through content, bosses and exploration – to unlock Mastery Tracks. Only one track can be active at a time, and it is filled by earning experience. Tracks reward all the characters on your account with new abilities, and are divided into Lore, Legends, Exploration and Combat. Lore mastery lets you learn the language of the jungle civilisations, granting access to new locations and combat techniques. Legends mastery unlocks the ability to collect what is needed for a Precursor – special



RELEASE DATE / TBA

PLATFORM / PC

GENRE / Massively-multiplayer online role-playing game

DEVELOPER / ArenaNet

PUBLISHER / NCSOFT

WEBSITE / heartofthorns.guildwars2.com



1 The eight episode season 2 of *Living World* can be purchased for around \$20, or 200 gems per episode.

SECONDARY SPECIALISATIONS

Every profession will gain access to a new sub-profession, which unlocks the ability to use a new weapon as well as new traits, skills, and profession mechanics. The Ranger for example, can become a Druid. As a Druid, the Ranger can use staves, which come with their own unique skills for Rangers. In their secondary spec, Necromancers gain access to greatswords, Mesmers can use shields, and Engineers get hammers which let their turrets fly around as little helicopters. Specialisations are unlocked at level 80, and are character specific. You can swap between Specialisations when out of combat. The expansion won't be adding any new weapon types, unfortunately; sorry polearm hopefuls.

GUILD VS. GUILD: STRONGHOLD

What ArenaNet calls an "evolution" of *Guild Wars*' Guild vs. Guild mode, the new Stronghold player vs. player map pits two teams against each other in a fight to control supply. Supply can be used to hire troops, which join the player in an assault on the enemy stronghold. The goal is to kill the enemy's Guild Lord. Along the way, players can enlist the aid of heroes, who act as powerful units. The entire mode is very much inspired by the "MOBA" genre. Players will be able to set up custom arenas with Stronghold as the game type, which will allow for more than just five-versus-five. There will only be one map for this game mode at launch, but it does feature leaderboards for guild teams. The existing Conquest PvP mode will also gain team leaderboards.

EXPANDED EXPERIENCES

The three-way server-on-server "World vs World" mode will gain a new Borderland with expanded mechanics, along with revisions to the existing maps that should make holding objectives more rewarding. Guilds will finally have access to guild halls they can claim and grow. We're looking forward to seeing more details from ArenaNet soon, and getting some hands-on time at PAX South in March. **NAG**

-Miktar



weapons used in crafting legendary weapons. Exploration mastery grants new movement abilities, like being able to hang-glide and fly through the air. Lastly, Combat mastery provides new abilities for the Fractals, for increased challenge and greater rewards. There will be two sets of Mastery Tracks, one for the expansion, and one for non-expansion content.

NEW PROFESSION: REVENANT

A new heavy armour-based profession, the Revenant lets you channel "legends" from the history of the *Guild Wars* series. When you channel as a Revenant, your Heal, Utility and Elite skills change based on the legend summoned. Two examples shown so far are King Jalis Ironhammer, which makes the Revenant hardier and more tank-like, giving frontline abilities that echo the tenacity of the Dwarves, and Mallyx the Unyielding, which grants supreme condition control, letting you remove conditions from your group and placing them on enemies. We're hoping to see much more of the Revenant soon, as ArenaNet are still parcelling out details slowly.



Heroes of the Storm

Gotta do those dailies!



I consider myself a player of a broad range of games, but of all the types that exist, games belonging to the relatively new genre of MOBA have never held my attention for more than a match or two. The Multiplayer Online Battle Arena genre doesn't appeal to me for a variety of reasons, but almost everything that Blizzard creates does appeal to me (except for *WoW*, because I like my free time), so I find myself oddly drawn towards *Heroes of the Storm*.

Maybe it's the signature Blizzard art style, the excellent presentation, or the fact that I

can slay Diablo with Raynor, or Zeratul, or a Murlok (named Murky, no less). It's probably more the last bits than anything else: the sheer oddity of combining all "Blizzard Universe" (which wasn't really a thing until now) characters into a single game is incredibly appealing. It smacks of Blizzard's renowned haughtiness, and it's delightful because of it.

While it shares the genre staple of 5v5 combat across a number of lanes (usually three), *Heroes of the Storm* breaks the MOBA mould in a few significant ways. For one, you're not stuck with a single map: there

are seven available in the current beta (with an eighth due soon), each presenting its own challenges and layouts for the players to grapple with, in addition to the normal actions of fending off enemy heroes (or

▶ Hero levels are averaged out for entire teams, rather than being individual. This means that weak links and stronger players are forced to play at the same level as everyone else. It also means the team that sucks together, dies together.

“These objectives, collectively called mechanics, are likely to be the biggest cause of divide between those who enjoy and those who dislike *Heroes of the Storm*”





RELEASE DATE / TBA

PLATFORM / PC

GENRE / Multiplayer online battle arena

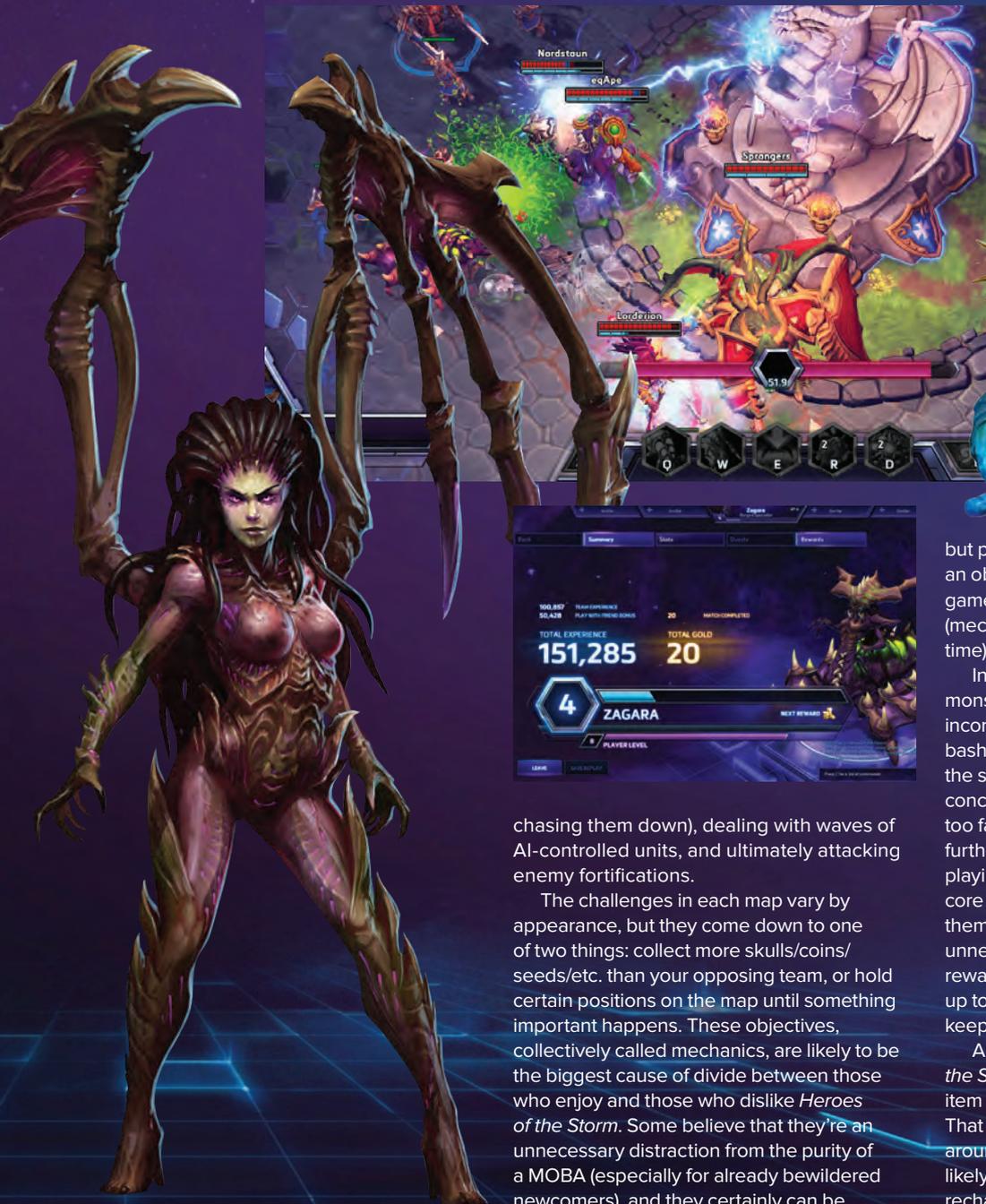
DEVELOPER / Blizzard Entertainment

PUBLISHER / Blizzard Entertainment

WEBSITE / eu.battle.net/heroes

WIN!

We have 30 (maybe more!) *Heroes of the Storm* beta keys to give away that we've secretly kept just for our magazine readers. If you want to stand a chance to win a beta key, simply send an email to competitions@nag.co.za with the subject line "I'll beta you up!" before the 13th of March, when the winners will be drawn. To redeem your key, you'll need a Battle.net account and about 4GB of available data.



but personally, I like the idea. I'm more of an objectives-based player in most team games anyway, so having a temporary focus (mechanics are only active about a third of the time) is a good way to keep things interesting.

In addition to mechanics, there are neutral monsters on the map that can be temporarily incorporated into your army when you've bashed them up enough – useful for tipping the scales of battle if you want to make a concerted push or need to make up for being too far behind your enemy team in level. This further enforces the concept that Blizzard's playing with here: distracting players from the core gameplay of a MOBA, possibly forcing them to deal with other menaces or risk taking unnecessary damage. There's a constant risk/reward exchange staring you in the face; it's up to you to figure out how to fit in with it and keep your play style dynamic during matches.

Another break from the norm is *Heroes of the Storm's* complete exclusion of in-match item shops, inventories, or item combinations. That means no recipes to learn, no messing around back at base (the only time you're likely to return to your base is to perform a recharge of health and mana (or, you know,

chasing them down), dealing with waves of AI-controlled units, and ultimately attacking enemy fortifications.

The challenges in each map vary by appearance, but they come down to one of two things: collect more skulls/coins/seeds/etc. than your opposing team, or hold certain positions on the map until something important happens. These objectives, collectively called mechanics, are likely to be the biggest cause of divide between those who enjoy and those who dislike *Heroes of the Storm*. Some believe that they're an unnecessary distraction from the purity of a MOBA (especially for already bewildered newcomers), and they certainly can be,

if you die)), and very little time spent out of combat. There aren't even potions to fiddle with; instead, characters can collect Regeneration Globes that are occasionally dropped on the battlefield to provide a small boost to HP and MP for all nearby allies, just like in *Diablo III*.

To replace in-match shopping sprees, *HotS* (which I guess no longer refers to *StarCraft II*'s expansion *Heart of the Swarm*) provides character customisation through its Talents system. As you play a character, you'll permanently increase their level (not in-match level, just "hero level"... it's not as complicated as it sounds), granting access to new Talents. Then, as you level-up your character during a match, you'll be able to select from those unlocked Talents. Some Talents provide access to new skills, and some boost your base attack, but most improve or change your existing skills to allow you to structure your character as each match progresses. It's a bit like the Talent tree from *World of*

Warcraft, although this version doesn't have prerequisites or branches.

This system is a bit confusing at first (although arguably less so than in-match shopping in other games), but once you've played a character a few times you'll have an idea of what sort of skills you enjoy using, and how you'd like to see those skills changed. The variety of skills is currently quite impressive but I do wonder how long it'll take before one grows bored of a certain hero. I guess the intention is to keep players switching up their preferred characters.

Talents and experience points come naturally as you play, but the other two currencies of in-game gold and real-world



GUARDI3N'S IMPRESSIONS

If you're a fan of Blizzard and all their games, and have always been intrigued by the MOBA genre, then *Heroes of the Storm* is a great introduction into this world. In a nutshell, it's a simplified and less overwhelming experience than starting out in *League of Legends* or *Dota 2*. Hardcore MOBA players may not find enough complexity in *Heroes of the Storm*, but the appeal here lies in the fact that game times are a lot shorter and action is almost immediate. Some of the

quest objectives on the different maps do feel a little frivolous and pointless at times, but it adds a dollop of diversity, if you like that kind of thing. Having spent the last two years playing *League of Legends* incessantly, I'm mildly intrigued by *Heroes of the Storm*, but not entirely hooked. Perhaps when my current zombie obsession (*Dying Light*, *Infestation: Survivor Stories* and *The Walking Dead*) has been sated, *Heroes of the Storm* will secure its place on my games-I-love-to-play list.





• Games tend to last 20-30 minutes on average, and accelerate in pace towards the end as heroes unlock their most powerful Talents. You have to stay alert if you want to avoid the painfully slow respawn time at higher levels.

REDTIDE'S IMPRESSIONS

So I played Raynor in the training videos and liked how the game introduced concepts and skills in a nice controlled way for my brain to absorb. I had already tried *League of Legends* and hated it – the learning curve was way too steep for me. I don't like having to study for seven years just to play a game and then be faced with hundreds of choices I don't understand just to get started. *Heroes of the Storm* has all the usual Blizzard polish and, if like some people you've been avoiding getting into MOBAs due to their complexity or just because you're a n00b that doesn't want to face aggressive players, this is a great place to kickstart your career. In much the same way that *Hearthstone* lets you effortlessly slip into the world of card games – the same appears to be true with *Heroes of the Storm*. Another bonus is

knowledge from other Blizzard games will help you feel more at home with the character pool – these are people/beasts/entities you know and should have a general idea of where their abilities are derived from. To further help newcomers there are tutorial missions that explain everything nicely and hold your hand (albeit a little too tightly) through the first few experiences. All this attention to detail and accessibility should leave you feeling confident and able to contribute in a meaningful way in your first proper game against real people. Just be careful, if you do end up having a good time, you're going to join the ranks of players that have become obsessed with these types of games. Remember there's only so much time in the day, and don't you have work to do?



“That means no recipes to learn, no messing about back at base, and very little time spent out of combat”

cash also need attention. Like *League of Legends*, *HotS* gives you a selection of free-to-play characters that rotate in and out of availability (on a weekly basis here). Other characters can be acquired at no cost (like the Demon Hunter named Valla, who's free with the *Reaper of Souls* collector's edition), but most of them cost money or gold to unlock. The average cost is about €8 (R110) for a hero, or about 8,000 gold pieces. Gold is earned incredibly slowly from normal play (20GP for completing a match, another 10 if you played with friends), but there are large rewards that come fairly quickly as you raise your player rank and the persistent levels for your various characters. There are also

randomly generated daily quests like “Play three matches as a *StarCraft* character” that provide 300-600GP a piece. All said it seems like a fair enough system, but you do have to play a number of games, and change active characters

often, to earn the gold you need to avoid spending any real money on this game. Of course, betas can change a lot during their lifetime, so don't get too stuck on any ideas just yet.

Blizzard's entry into the MOBA wars is gathering steam. Fresh out of its alpha phase, this is a game that has presence, polish, and plenty of charm. Speaking as someone who's generally avoided this genre for a long time, I'm impressed. For everyone else, there's definitely potential here, but just how much you're prepared to relinquish your MOBA staples might determine the amount of enjoyment you get out of *Heroes of the Storm*. **NAG**

- GeometriX

Project CARS



Can you Stig? Will you Stig? Dare you Stig?

If there's any particular reason I'd give for someone to play *Project CARS*, it would come down to a single sentence: "It's like *Shift*, but with more cars and a little bit of help from the Stig." Created by Slightly Mad Studios, *Project CARS* started out as an Early Access game on Steam and it quickly climbed the ranks to join other racing titles like *Assetto Corsa* and Bugbear's *Wreckfest*, duking it out for pole position in the Early Access program.

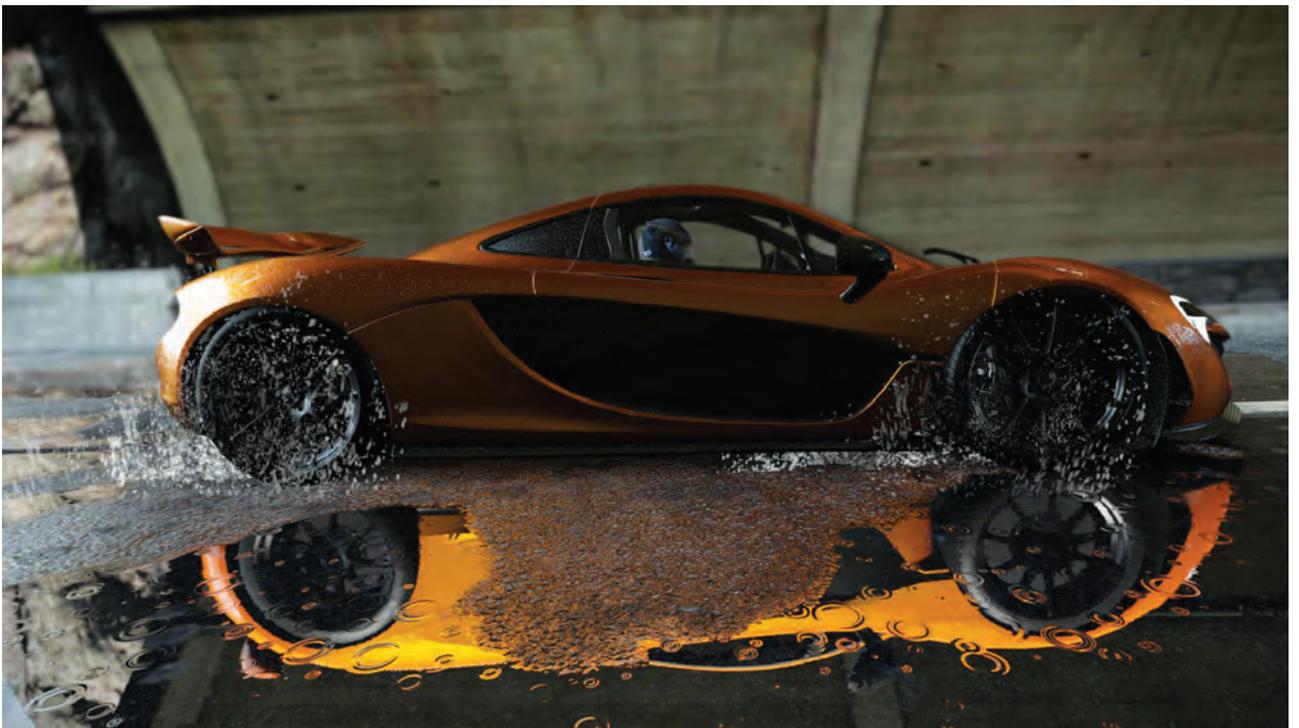
If you've played *Need for Speed: Shift*, you'll already have a firm grasp of what *Project CARS* will offer in terms of gameplay, but there are several twists to the traditional formula. First, *Project CARS* does not lock content behind pay walls or progression schemes. As soon as you start up the game, you are able to take a Bugatti Veyron Super Sport out on the

Nürburgring and thrash it all you want. Players can also hop into different racing disciplines whenever they feel like it. Cash does not exist in the game, only speed and more speed.

It's not just the freedom that makes the game unique, the technologies in use also make it a distinct experience. In most games the wear on components like tyres, brakes, or the suspension used to be all pre-modelled and put into a lookup table for the game to simulate how degraded your grip levels should be after a few laps. *Project CARS* changes this and does real-time simulation for your tyres and other components that affect performance. Most other simulators don't reward more careful driving to reduce tyre wear, but it definitely works here.

Many of these changes to the game came from the fans who jumped in early and purchased Tool Packs. These were available to anyone who wanted to participate in the development process, assisting Slightly Mad

"It's like *Shift*, but with more cars and a little bit of help from the Stig."



in content creation, making skins and modifications for cars, quality assurance, and marketing the game through social networks. Through the use of alternative funding models like these, Slightly Mad was able to bankroll the entire development of *Project CARS* without a publisher.

To make this change more impactful to the community members who helped develop the game, each contributor is paid a portion of the sales profits for three years after the game's release. Slightly Mad's funding model therefore gives these early contributors incentive to get their friends and followers on social networks to buy the game.

On launch the game will boast a selection of over 67 cars from different disciplines and more than 52 individual track locations, not including alternative layouts. To avoid paying licence fees for some circuit names, they are codenamed according to geographical location.



Project CARS (Community Assisted Racing Simulator) is the first community-funded game that enlisted Early Access contributors to create content and share in the sales profits as the game gains more sales and fans.

Project CARS was made possible with the help of three expert racing drivers – Ben Collins, formerly *Top Gear's* Stig, Oliver Webb, former Signatech-Alpine driver for the European Le Mans, and Nicolas Hamilton, a former TOCA and Renault Clio cup driver and the younger brother of Lewis Hamilton.



Above all, racing games don't need to be flashy or graphically supreme to be good – they need to be fun to drive and challenging to master. The best simulator in the world won't have people playing it for very long if the cars handle like barges and the steering feels lifeless. I can personally attest to the driving experience thanks to a demo booth at rAge 2014 where *Project CARS* was shown off. I was able to get in three rounds of four laps each around the Silverstone circuit using an RUF CTR3 Clubsport.

Right from the start I could feel and see the difference that Slightly Mad's remodelled Madness Engine made to the game. Driving the off-brand modified Porsche at full blast down the "Hang" straight you could see the bumper camera angle itself a bit skyward as the G-forces pushed on the car at the back. Braking forces the camera angle down and the car begins to feel a little slippery as the rear tyres lose grip. There's a slight hint of body roll in the corners, but it's better than what Polyphony Digital does in *Gran Turismo 6*, which can give you motion sickness. Rain blurs your vision, tyre smoke masks potential dangers and the asphalt looks really gritty and hard. Graphically, it's pure eye candy.

Hitting the accelerator again after exiting the "Stowe" corner, a slightly sharp right-turn,

the attention to detail in the sound gave me an enjoyable fizzing sensation in the base of my spine and butterflies in my stomach. I enjoyed the *Shift* series mostly for the spectacular audio, something that's been lacking in many other racing games over the years as more attention is paid to visuals and capped frame rates.

Having driven a Porsche Boxster S once before, I know exactly what a flat-six engine sounds like and I was hearing that same mechanical melody being pumped out the speakers in the racing seat I was snuggled in. Working through the gears manually, I was able to hear how the car sounded in different rev ranges and gears and it's definitely something that I want to experience again.

I think that *Project CARS* is going to find many dedicated fans who, like me, are always looking to fill the hole in their hearts left from *Need for Speed: Prostreet* and *Shift*. *Project CARS* is not for everyone and if you're not a purist at heart and need more structured progression, you'd be best served looking elsewhere. If you're looking for something new and challenging and rewarding to master, I'd say *Project CARS* will be right up your alley.

NAG
-CataclysmZA

RELEASE DATE / 17 March 2015

PLATFORM / PC / PS4 / XBO / Wii U

GENRE / Racing

DEVELOPER / Slightly Mad Studios

PUBLISHER / Slightly Mad Studios / Bandai Namco (distributor)

WEBSITE / www.driveclub.com





NAG POSTER #3 / STARCRAFT II



BATTLEFIELD

HARDLINE

RELEASE DATE / 20 March 2015
 PLATFORM / 360 / PC / PS3 / PS4 / XBO
 GENRE / First person shooter
 DEVELOPER / Visceral Games
 PUBLISHER / Electronic Arts
 WEBSITE / www.battlefield.com/hardline

THE HEAT IS ON

Battlefront is scheduled for this year (although we'll probably only see it early 2016) and Visceral need to make sure *Battlefield Hardline* won't shine for just a few months then fade into obscurity once players start assaulting Hoth in AT-ATs and hijacking speeder bikes on Endor. They also have to prove that *Hardline* isn't just some elaborate cops and robbers *Battlefield 4* expansion sold at full price. Let's also not forget that they had to push the release date to this year after less than favourable feedback and comment from the players and press in 2014. To top it all off the recent open beta saw a record six million players try it out – more than Activision's heavily marketed new IP *Destiny*. There's a fair bit at stake here for any number of reasons... cue the dramatic music.

OUT IN THE COLD

Hardline is using the Frostbite 3 engine which, while still competent in getting the job done, is showing its age, especially when compared to what else is out there these days. That special *Battlefield* atmosphere is all over this game, but Visceral have tweaked and polished things in a way that'll have veterans smiling with appreciation. Naturally the whole game is sporting fresh textures, models and skins, new maps, new vehicles and weapons, and themed gadgets. You'll be hard pressed to find anything visually familiar or leftover from *Battlefield 4* other than the feel of the game and those crazy trademark *Battlefield* moments. One thing that Visceral have done very well is refine the experience. For example: the mini-map now shows the boundary box around capture points and also lets you know if someone is nearby, telling you a point is now contested. When you're counting down to

Visceral are under pressure, the kind just short of what's needed to produce a diamond. DICE's *Star Wars:*

start you can book a seat on a chopper, and a small mark appears on the vehicle icon letting you know how many seats are taken. These vehicle icons also indicate how long until a vehicle spawns with a gradually filling grey box – nice polish. The clever code stuff running the networking and bullet detection in the background feels good, and the *Hardline* beta felt much better than the *Battlefield 4* beta when it came out. People take hits when you shoot them and while the guns feel a little less punchy when compared to *Advanced Warfare*, they do the job and never leave you feeling cheated. The addition of vehicular running and gunning also feels good and hanging outside a car while firing grenades behind you in a high-speed chase is smooth and immersive. It looks like Visceral has inherited an overall fixed game from DICE and then spent the time

**“DEATH IS AGAIN
PERMANENT AS THE
CRIMINALS MUST PUT
DOWN A FORMER CRIMINAL
TURNED STATE WITNESS.
THERE’S NOTHING WORSE
THAN A RAT.”** 



wisely making the gameplay fun, frantic, and cool.

Money is a thing now. You earn dollars for playing properly – completing objectives as well as just killing the bad guys (or the good guys, if you're on the wrong side of the law). You can then spend this money on upgrades or even buying Battle Packs which contain random rewards. There is no class weapon progression, so if you like you can save up and get exactly what you want – patience being the other currency then. Weapon unlocking and progression is all very free and open – just like it should be. Also carrying through from *BF4* are the battlefield pickups, examples here include the FIM-92 Stinger (goodbye choppers), SMAW rocket launcher, M240B LMG, and even a set of defibrillators. Health and ammunition can also be found stuck on walls and behind doors. Another small quality of life tweak is the ability to run up to a medic and simply take health from them (same with ammunition). Selfish medics are no longer a problem – just take what you need when you need it. Live game map altering (aka "Levolution") also makes it into *Hardline*, and while we didn't see a whole building come down in the beta there was a nasty dust storm that rolled through town and a huge construction crane could be brought down to create new pathways and obstacles. Smaller things like raising bollards or collapsing floors all change the map and the way people play on it. The maps are alive and nothing stays as it was when the rockets start flying. You can't flatten buildings but you can poke more than a few holes in them.

"THE ADDITION OF VEHICULAR RUNNING AND GUNNING ALSO FEELS GOOD AND HANGING OUTSIDE A CAR WHILE FIRING GRENADES BEHIND YOU IN A HIGH-SPEED CHASE IS SMOOTH AND IMMERSIVE."

I'M IN...

"Remember, hacking is more than just a crime. It's a survival trait." – Razor, Hackers

In *Battlefield Hardline* you're a hacker and not a commander, things are a little different and instead of dropping bombs (and sometimes vehicles) on the heads of enemies, you also get to release gas and peek through security cameras. In this mode you can view the action in three ways: a top down overall map mode, over the shoulder of a squad leader, or using an overhead movable camera. As a hacker you can hack a security camera thereby revealing enemy positions or you can activate a gas system or even overload a transformer – both excellent for disorientating and slowing down the enemy. GPS spotting is something else you can do, which reveals enemy position in a tight circle and of course GPS blocking, which prevents the enemy from seeing your team on the mini-map. This is good for when your team is trying to conceal which side of the vault they're trying to break into. Trace is a map-wide scan showing the location of high value targets and other useful bits of information. Fast deploy is good for a squad that's attacking a location and you can even send a perk-based thank you to squads that do your bidding by offering them upgrades. Of course those that ignore your "suggestions" get nothing. Finally overclock boosts the time it takes for all your hacker abilities to recharge, nice and simple but the risk is overloading random systems forcing you to wait even longer for them to recharge. In *Hardline*, the hacker mode is more of a helping hand than a fist of doom meaning you can't directly kill the bad guys while playing as the hacker. Unless of course you blow up a transformer next to someone on very low health. Hacker is fun but lacks teeth.

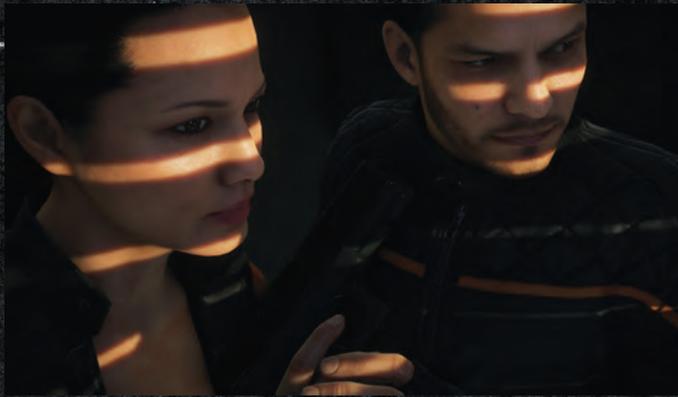
INSIDE JOB

Much of the success or failure of *Hardline* is going to come down to the multiplayer modes available in the game. In the beta we looked at three game modes and three different maps.

First up is Heist. Here the criminals must gain access to a vault, steal two bags of cash, and then escape in a helicopter. The cops, well, they must stop them. This mode requires a purpose-built map with a vault and two escape points, so learning these maps is going to be a wise move. In the beta the action played out on the map called Bank Job. This mode is best played on a small map and well-coordinated teams should do well no matter what the objective. Gone are the distant locations and foreign environments. All the action in *Hardline* takes place in locations that are just around the corner from your house, down the road at the bank or in that shopping centre you visit on the weekends. Bringing it home and putting the action in places you've either visited or seen in countless movies and television shows makes for a fun change of pace.

Next up was a straightforward Conquest game on a little map called Dust Bowl – a forgotten dried up town that occasionally sees a dust storm pass through. Here both teams compete to control locations and deplete the other side's tickets. The more control points your team has the faster the enemy tickets run down. This map was fairly large and had two types of choppers, many vehicles and dirt bikes to get into the action and around the map. If you're looking for a straight up *Battlefield* multiplayer fight then conquest is as vanilla as it gets.





NEW CREW

The classes are recognisable but different and of course there's a class for all styles of play. It looks like they've been reengineered around Hotline and keeping up the pace of the game. There are some new gadgets available, so experiment with them until you find what you like.

In terms of classes, first up is the Operator (old Assault/Medic), whose weapon specialisation is assault rifles and carbines – gone is the underslung grenade launcher. In addition, Operators drop medic bags, can heal, revive, and even self-revive under certain conditions. Next is the Mechanic (old Engineer), this guy can fix vehicles or blow them up and specialises in carbines; he also has a satellite phone for insertions and a grenade launcher perfect for blowing up moving cars. The Enforcer (old Support) features a shotgun, riot shield, tear gas and gas masks, making him the perfect role for area denial. He also carries ammunition which you can just take off him. Last up is the Professional (old Recon), this class is all about sniper rifles, laser trip mines, and effective close range weapons. DMRs (Designed Marksman Rifles) and bolt-action rifles make him the perfect marksman, good for picking off stubborn targets and taking out vehicles. There's something for everyone and of course there are so many other toys and gadgets like grappling hooks and zip lines and oops... we're out of space.



“MUCH OF THE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF *HARDLINE* IS GOING TO COME DOWN TO THE MULTIPLAYER MODES AVAILABLE IN THE GAME. IN THE BETA WE LOOKED AT THREE GAME MODES AND THREE DIFFERENT MAPS.”

ON MY ACE

For once, it looks like the *Battlefield* series is getting a game that actually pays attention to the single-player side of things, and what better studio to handle this than Visceral, the team behind the excellent *Dead Space* series.

The SP campaign will follow the exploits of recently made detective Nick Mendoza and his partner Khai Minh Dao, as well as a number of supporting characters along the way. Nick will have to deal with a drug war that's ravaging the city of Los Angeles by going undercover and generally, going way off the books. If this sounds to you like a plot for a serial crime drama, then you're spot on: themes in *Hardline* are heavily based on series like *Law & Order*, *CSI*, *NCIS*, and other important-sounding acronyms.

In one mission from the campaign, Nick and another chap have to break out of a jail and then retrieve their gear from a criminal compound by using a mix of distractions, stealthy take-downs, and tactical decision-making – very clearly *Far Cry* inspired, which we're okay with. The weapons on offer are also more geared towards non-lethal gameplay, although there's nothing stopping you from running in guns-blazing, if that's more your style.

From what we've seen of the SP campaign, Visceral appears to be treating *Hardline* like it would any of its own games, like an IP isolated from the *Battlefield* franchise. Which, you know... isn't such a bad thing.





The last and most exciting mode was Hotwire, and this mode played out on both Dust Bowl and another map called Downtown. Here the conquest flags are vehicles that you must drive at speed to deplete enemy tickets. If a car is destroyed it quickly reappears and the next chase is on. Players can hang out of windows and poke guns out of the back door while driving vans, making the action fast and frantic all the time. This is really conquest on rails with exploding cars and high speed collisions. It's a fun and exciting game mode and should be the one most players will come back to.

Besides these three game modes, four other modes are promised in the final game. Team deathmatch, the name says it all. Blood Money, here a pile of loot must be stolen or secured as evidence; get the loot to your team's vault for the win but remember that vaults can also be cracked and raided. Rescue is a new but also familiar competitive mode where the cops must save the lives of innocents at the hands of the criminals; death is permanent so watch your step. The last mode is Crosshair; death is again permanent as the criminals must put down a former criminal turned state witness. There's nothing worse than a rat. Hunt him down and kill him.

It's all very exciting stuff and the developers have spent a lot of time creating some fresh gaming experiences that when combined with *Battlefield's* pure craziness is going to have a lot of tall tales and retelling of that one time when this mad thing happened but I didn't record it so you'll just have to believe me.

GETAWAY

It's easy to talk about potential and possibilities but you are being asked to pay full price for this game, and based on everything new and the commitment from the developers it seems justifiable – especially if you're a fan of the series. New players will also get something fresh and exciting; *Hardline* has the potential to attract new gamers into the fold by presenting cops and robbers, something familiar even dad can get into. For fans this is a fun, frivolous and frantic take on an old formula. *Hardline* takes all those signature *Battlefield* moments and condenses them, and then delivers them more frequently and in tighter spaces. Having your tanker destroyed by the helicopter you just jumped out of and then the whole fireball crashing into the car you were trying to take down originally is just pure gaming heaven. It leaves you smiling and shaking your head at the screen. It's just a faster, more and better take on an enjoyable shooter franchise done by a competent crew with an eye for detail and a distinct swagger.



INTERVIEW

with **JEFF ZARING** – lead multiplayer map designer, **SCOTT PROBST** – senior producer, and **EVAN CHAMPLIN** – senior multiplayer designer.

NAG: Why was the cops and robbers theme chosen, and are we looking at Cowboys and Indians next, or ship engineers and necromorphs?

Scott: Both good ideas! *Laughs* About three years ago when we started working on *Battlefield 3*'s expansion pack, we could see how big the universe of *Battlefield* really was, and that opened up conversations about what sort of worlds we could take this into. So when we started to talk about cops and criminals; it was one of those things that is so relatable and is so personal – we all grew up playing these sorts of games in our childhood – that fantasy is something that comes across so many mediums of entertainment, including television and film. We felt that within the gaming realm, that experience hasn't really been nailed, and we thought that the franchise really lent itself well to the idea of cops and criminals.

NAG: What games did you draw inspiration from that share this sort of theme?

Scott: I was going to say *Battlefield*...

NAG: That doesn't count!

Evan: As professional first-person shooter developers it's our responsibility to make sure that we play everything. We absolutely looked at other games and took inspiration from them. The *SWAT* series is a great example. I know there are a lot of fans in the studio of the *SWAT* series. Myself and Thad, lead multiplayer designer, we also both dig *GTA* and *Payday*, and pretty-much every other first-person shooter. It's just a matter of figuring out what works best for our experience. It's a matter of looking at other teams and seeing what direction they're going in, and making sure that we're complementing them, but also doing our own unique stuff in the game.

NAG: We've seen long stretches of action in some of the maps; how do you go about designing environments so that they contain the action without making the player feeling restricted?

Jeff: That's one of the big challenges, and big rewards, in making this game. In comparison to other franchises, there's a lot more to do in *Battlefield*: there are a lot more possibilities for the players to engage in. There are gadgets and weapons and vehicles, and just the scale of the maps, and the whole rock/paper/scissors aspect of the gameplay. We look at all of the elements that we need to support and block that out. We've got a very iterative and open system at the office where we encourage everyone who can to stop their work and join in the playtest during the day. We get peoples' anonymous input about the game – they're not always confident about giving open and honest feedback with their name attached. It's important to use to get that feedback, though, and also from the public. We use that feedback and our instincts to work overtime to massage all of that together into what has become a very exciting and compelling experience.





NAG: Based on that feedback from the first beta, what was the most surprising thing you got back that made you sit back and go, hang on?

Evan: After the first beta we had a list that was a mile long of stuff we wanted to think about and address, but I think one of the most significant things that we changed based on the feedback, was that we pretty much redesigned the whole second half of Heist. It used to be very fixed in terms of where the drop-off locations were for the bags, so once the player has retrieved the bags they pretty much just go to the two locations. It ended up being a stale experience, you saw a lot of the same results. So we decided to switch it up and basically randomise those drop-off locations every time you play. Also, as a part of that, we added a defend loop at the end, so you have to defend while an NPC helicopter flies into the space and picks up the bag.

Beyond that, the other thing that we focused on was the cops and criminal fantasy, making sure that each faction really felt unique. At that point we decided to make the weapons asymmetrical, so the criminals have different weapons from the cops, and that helped us make the factions feel like a different experience, depending on which team you're on.

NAG: Are there different organisations within each side?

Evan: There are a couple of different variations of them depending on which region the maps takes place in. There's an undercover police faction and a SWAT faction. And for the criminals there's a group of thugs, and then the high-end professionals. It just depends on which map you're on.



NAG: There's been a fair bit of change in the vehicle play – civilian vehicles to be specific. How much has the physics engine been tweaked to make this work?

Scott: In terms of the network codes and physics that's going on there, we've had an engineer who's pretty much for the entirety of this project been responsible for making sure that the vehicle code works as intended. If you take a step back and look at *Battlefield 4* versus *Hardline*, the way that players use vehicles is very different. [In *Battlefield*] you've got a heavy artillery tank that should stay back from combat and shell some things, and then you'll come up and get on the main gun sometimes, but you're not going to be taking cars and T-boning other cars, trying to ram people off the road. So there was a lot of legwork that went into changing and improving the vehicle network code to make sure that everything is represented properly on all machines in a multiplayer match, and players are getting the intended experience according to the design.

NAG: *Battlefield* is typically known for its large-scale battles, whereas *Hardline* seems more focused on smaller, more tactical skirmishes. How are you trying to balance what *BF* veterans are used to and newcomers who might be coming in from other franchises and playing *Hardline* as their first *Battlefield* game?

Evan: *Battlefield* is a big game in terms of the variety of experiences that you can have, and *Hardline* does a pretty good job of representing that. We have some maps that are definitely on the larger scale. But we've tended to gear a little more towards the small and medium-sized stuff, and a little more of a focused design. It's a little more guided and directed, helping newer players have an easier time understanding the matches, so they can grow from there.

NAG: What are you doing in terms of balancing the map types on offer?

Jeff: We try to provide a range of gameplay experiences. We have a couple of maps that force a more direct engagement on the players – those are going to be the smaller maps. But we also have a lot of larger maps. Nothing that approaches the scale of the bigger *BF4* maps though. We do have some maps that are large, that support a wide range of pathing and flanking options. So if a player wants to lay low, or sneak around to an objective area without being noticed, they do have that opportunity to play in that fashion.

Scott: A key way that we've validated a lot of the map diversity is that we worked with a lot of influential first-person shooter players who we call "The Gamechangers". They've been coming out to Visceral Studio for about eighteen months now. We've had multiple meetings with these guys. Every time they come out we give them the multiplayer mode and say "have at it. Tell us what you love, tell us what you hate." Having those guys' feedback has been invaluable in not just the map design, but the gadgets, the weapons, the balance – everything from A to Z.

NAG: Have you noticed any sort of preference from people wanting to play either the cops or criminals?

Evan: I'd say it's pretty mixed. A lot of people have different fantasies about what they want to achieve, and we have plenty of game modes to support those fantasies. I'd say Heist is a little more about the criminal fantasy of breaking into the vault, getting the money and escaping with it. Typically players like the idea of playing as the criminals on that mode. But if you look at a game mode like Rescue, it's kind of the opposite fantasy. It's a SWAT team that's going into a location and trying to rescue hostages: it's a five-on-five, single life mode.

NAG
- RedTide

Reviews *Intro*

Ask any normal person if there's an "I" in team and they'll tell you you're crazy. Ask the NAG reviews team and they'll tell you a hundred answers because NOBODY FOLLOWS THE STYLE GUIDE. Okay, I'm fine now. Got that out of my system. Meet your reviewers...

Question / **Are you a lone wolf or a team player?**



DANE "BARKSKIN" REMENDES

I'm normally a lone wolf. It's probably because I grew up playing tons of free-for-all matches in *Quake* and *Unreal Tournament*. Still, I like to think I can function as part of a team when it's needed.

CURRENTLY PLAYING

Dying Light, *Heroes of the Storm*, *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II*



DELANO "DELANO" CUZZUCOLI

I prefer team play. Working cooperatively towards a goal or against a common enemy is more satisfying.

CURRENTLY PLAYING

The Talos Principle



GEOFF "GEOMETRIX" BURROWS

It depends on my mood. Sometimes I'll happily spend whole matches supporting other players, but other times I'll ignore everything else and blindly gun for objectives on my own.

CURRENTLY PLAYING

Grim Fandango HD, *Dying Light*, *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II*, *Heroes of the Storm*



MATT "SAND_STORM" FICK

Team player, because I'm bad at competitive games and would rather have them on my side. But secretly I hate them all...

CURRENTLY PLAYING

Apotheon, *Transistor*, *Marvel Puzzle Quest*



MICHAEL "RETTIDE" JAMES

Lone Wolf. I'm not a team player because people are dumb. I also like to make a difference in the overall battle. If I'm on the other side of the map killing dudes and capturing bases it forces the enemy to spend resources dealing with me. I like that.

CURRENTLY PLAYING

Battlefield: Hardline beta, *Hearthstone*, *Diablo III*, *Terraria*

mini review

Kairo

Let go of the shooting. Let go of the scoring. Let go of your need to have objectives clearly defined. That's the best way to play the minimalist, first-person puzzler experience that is *Kairo*.

The game casts players as a formless sentience wandering a bizarre, dream-like world interconnected by various gateways. Where you are and what your purpose is are deliberately left ambiguous; the point is to explore and take in your surroundings whilst solving the odd puzzle.

The puzzles in question are highly abstract in nature and their solutions – indeed, even their effects – are hardly ever apparent. Players are often going to have to backtrack to see if their decisions or patterns activated another portal, changed the configuration of

the landscape or just generally opened up the world further in some manner.

Graphically, the title makes use of bare textures, bright colours and film grain to give the environment a distinctive look and feel. Each area is coloured-coded to add variety and distinction and helps break up the monotony. The music and sound effects are equally simplistic and help in creating a lonely, introspective mood.

If you're up for something different and relaxing, *Kairo* is the sort of weird, arty game that should rocket to the top of your shopping list. **NAG**

- Delano



79 A relaxing, surreal first-person dream simulator.

HEARD AT THE OFFICE...

“Can we please not hire people with the same names? It’s very confusing.”

- Michael



MIKLOS “MIKIT0707” SZECSEI
Lone Wolf. I play games so that I don’t have to interact with people. IF I MP with you, know that you are part of an elite few that are allowed into my game time. Feel privileged.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Elite Dangerous, Diablo III



MIKTAR “MIKTAR” DRACON
Depends on the game and my mood. Some games I play because I want to play as part of a team, others because I want to go it alone.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Guild Wars 2, Beseige, Warframe, Hyrule Warriors DLC3, Super Smash Bros.



SARAH “BELLUM” BROWNE
I have to start off as a lone-wolf while I’m getting my bearings in a game. Don’t even be in the same room as me – much growling and snarling ensues. But, once I’m comfortable with the game-play, I’m super happy to have a Player 2 – it counts toward my social quota.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Pokemon X, Thief



TARRYN “AZIMUTH” VAN DER BYL
Team player. Go team. Especially me. Because I AM THE ONLY COMPETENT MEMBER OF THIS TEAM, GARETH, WHAT ARE YOU EVEN DOING.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Dying Light, Shadow of Mordor, Destiny.



WESLEY “CATACLYSMZA” FICK
It depends on the game and how badly my team is cobbled together. I’m usually standing behind the lines, providing cover fire. I don’t care much for leaderboards. **CURRENTLY PLAYING**
Borderlands 2, Civilization: Beyond Earth

▶ **mini review**

Apotheon

We occasionally encounter a game whose aesthetic is given more attention than the core gameplay itself. Such games tend to be more miss than hit, often existing as little more than showcases in shallowness. *Apotheon* by Alientrap comes close to being an exception to the rule, but not quite.

The game casts players in the role of Nikandreos, who is tasked by Zeus’ wife Hera to ascend Mount Olympus and give her husband and his cohorts a good spanking. This is because Zeus is a jerk who has decided to abandon humanity and doom the world to war, famine and darkness.

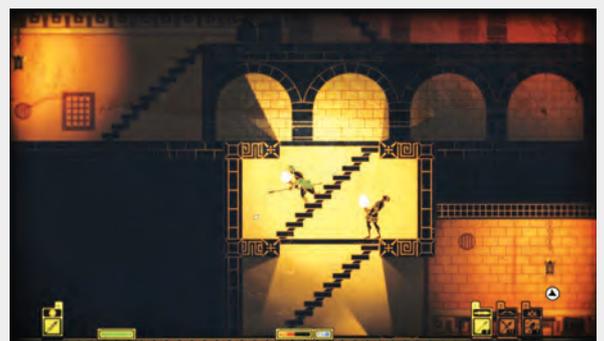
As Nikandreos, players will traverse *Metroid*-style levels and undertake various quests whilst fighting men and mythical creatures. There is a very simple crafting system (allowing for the creation of

power-ups and weapons), as well as an assortment of ranged and melee weapons, giving the game an interesting, RPG-like angle. However, it doesn’t hide the fact that the game’s FPS-style controls are unwieldy, as is the delayed reaction to attacking.

What really sets this title apart are the awesome, simple 2D visuals inspired by Greek pottery. Unfortunately, the audio doesn’t follow the visuals, with forgettable music and dreadful voice acting.

It’s a competent game that’s worth a playthrough, though it’s average at best with annoying-but-forgivable downfalls. **NAG**

- Delano



70 Nowhere near as classic as its theme, *Apotheon* is a clever idea with only an average game backing it up.

| | | | |
|--|---|--|----------------------------|
| PLATFORMS / PC / PS4 / XBO | REVIEWED ON / PC | GENRE / First-person action | DEVELOPER / Techland |
| AGE RATING / 18 | MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > 4 players | PUBLISHER / Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment | |
| WEBSITE / dyinglightgame.com | | | DISTRIBUTOR / Ster Kinekor |



Dying Light

Oh, you think darkness is your ally?

being the new guy in the zombie apocalypse is a tough gig. Everyone expects you to be insufferably useful. “Hey New Guy, I left my little brother trapped in a zombie-infested hovel, would you be a peach and go rescue him for me? I’d go, but I sprained my retina doing push-ups,” shouts one inconsiderate sod while you’re on the way to the bathroom, seemingly oblivious of your desperate need to take care of some deeply personal business. Before you’re even done hurriedly complying to his request because you’re about to leak fluids all over the nice, clean (well, nice and clean insofar as the post-apocalypse allows) floor, someone else is tapping you on the shoulder, excitedly explaining that they could fashion some incense to lessen the supernatural stench in here if you’ll just bring them 1,000 lavender herbs – which are usually found right in the middle of Zombie Street, Zombieville. You look down at the blood-smeared, battered old shovel you call a weapon that’s hanging from your belt. It looks almost as exhausted as you feel. Your shoulders slump, you let out a weary sigh, and you accept, even though all you really want to do is find a quiet corner somewhere, curl up into a little ball and sob yourself to sleep – because it’s the zombie apocalypse, and it’s crappy.

Techland’s *Dying Light* is the natural evolution of Techland’s *Dead Island*. Where the latter was a bit clumsy and very often broken (but very lovable and a ton of fun in spite of that), the former is tighter, smarter and



far more polished. It also breaks less, which is always good. And like its predecessor, it’s an absolute blast to play. Set in the fictional Turkish city of Harran, you are Kyle Crane, an undercover operative who infiltrates Harran to locate a dangerous target because a stern voice on his radio told him to. As you probably know, there’s a quarantine in effect on Harran, because the city is locked in a brawl with the risen dead. Crane soon discovers just how dire the situation is, with pockets of survivors (many of whom are infected, with only a precious substance called Antizin preventing them from turning into brain-hungry zombies) enduring a daily battle for survival. To be perfectly honest, I haven’t been great at keeping up with the game’s story. It’s not that the narrative is rubbish – but it’s trite, it’s predictable, it’s sometimes difficult to follow and it’s filled with mostly uninteresting, clichéd characterisation. The chief villain in particular is so dreadfully stereotypical of every zombie apocalypse antagonist ever that it’s



When you’re up high, you sway precariously as the wind howls around you. Often, the fear of falling to your death is far greater than the fear of the undead.



difficult to take him seriously, even when the narrative does manage to become vaguely gripping. I mean, I get that it wouldn't be much of a zombie apocalypse without some megalomaniacal, torture-loving asshole (who probably wears an eyepatch, although this isn't strictly necessary) to remind you that even when zombies walk the Earth, it's still other humans of whom you should be most afraid – but surely there's a more interesting way to tackle the issue.

Thankfully, I'm not exactly here for the story, much as I'd have loved to see something more engaging than what's on offer. The game itself is where there's endless delight to be found, provided you like the sound of an open-world survival experience full of zombie faces to kick/stab/smash, goodies to pilfer and stuff to do. *Dying Light* does an excellent job of ensuring you're never left with nowhere to go and nothing to see. Its world is full of survivors who'll give you tasks to complete, everything ranging from dull fetch quests



(made somewhat less dull by the knowledge that at any moment you could accidentally find yourself face to face with a mob of hungry undead) to full-on mini-storylines. Occasionally these actually manage to be more interesting than the missions in the main narrative. Random encounters often pop up on your map while you're exploring the world, offering rapid-fire diversions from whatever it is you're currently doing. Of course there are goals you can set for yourself as well, like climbing certain buildings or scouring the environment for items to collect. Exploration is powered by a parkour-inspired free-running system that lets you tear through the environment at impressive speed, vaulting off of zombies, clambering your way up the sides of buildings, sliding through openings and later using your grappling hook to swiftly escape crowds of enemies. I've had lots of fun purely exploring the environment, rifling through cupboards and picking the locks of chests to find more stuff, all while trying to not get boxed in by enemies.

Like *Dead Island*, there's a significant action RPG component to *Dying Light*. Crane's got abilities that can be unlocked and upgraded across a trio of skill trees relating to agility, combat and general survival. A crafting system very similar to *Dead Island's* is in place; discovering blueprints will allow

you to craft zany new weapons and items (like baseball bats with makeshift blowtorches attached, which deal extra fire damage), and improve existing gear. Melee combat is at the game's core, and while you'll find ranged weapons (like shurikens and guns), many of them make tremendous amounts of noise, which can attract deadlier threats if you're not careful. Close-quarters combat is wildly satisfying, especially as you unlock ever-more outrageous abilities – and the game is packed with gratuitous gore, so it's definitely not one for the kids, or anyone even remotely squeamish.

Now, the zombies. They're fantastic. I could watch the basic ones stumble around for hours, awkwardly tripping over obstructions and mindlessly charging off of rooftops to get at you. There's even *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*-style environmental hazards (like spiked walls and bins) that zombies can be kicked into, when they're not accidentally stumbling into them on their own. A number of special infected join them, like fast-moving runner zombies, ranged spitters and impossibly large brutes wielding impossibly large weapons that'll remove an impossibly large chunk of your abdomen if they're allowed to get too close. Traversing the world during the daytime isn't particularly taxing – although it can get very

AZIMUTH'S OPINION

He arrived suddenly and without warning, an angel of retribution borne, mighty and vengeful, upon the wings of a gathering storm. Basically, some random guy from my Xbox Live friend list dropped out of the network aether and onto the nearby rooftops of Harran, and he had super high level weapons to share with us. I told Geoff, and he said it's cheating, but one-hitting zombies in the first disorienting and occasionally terrifying hours of *Dying Light* was a special kind of glorious. Besides, I think Geoff is just jelly that he had to bash things over and over with a busted wrench until they were, like, "Okay, jeez, I give up. Just stop bashing me with that busted wrench."

Meanwhile, back in the zombie apocalypse, it's not like having super high level weapons matters much at night, when the real baddies come out to play and survival means a shrieking, helter-skelter blitz for the closest safe house. Oh, you don't have a safe house close by? Then you wasted your time during the day. Let this be a lesson for the real zombie apocalypse, and next time, don't forget to put down some traps.

If you've played *Dead Island*, you already know what to expect but with less beach vacation from hell and more parkour. If you missed out on one of 2011's most scandalously underrated games, shame on you but now you can make up for it.

80



Yes, there are human enemies as well. They're generally much trickier to deal with than the zombies – but they often drop powerful weapons and valuable loot.

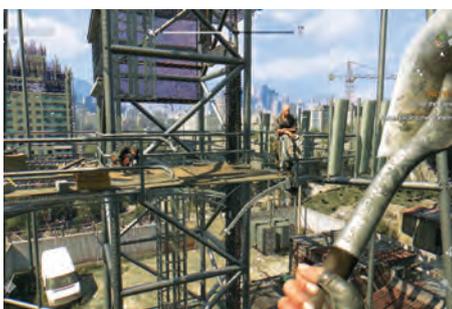


hairy, especially when you're unwittingly surrounded or hit a sudden dead-end inside a building with a train of zombies in tow. When night falls in the game, however, things go from manageable to terrifying in a heartbeat. A light-sensitive breed of Super Zombie comes out to play, and you've got to pay attention to your surroundings and keep an eye on the mini-map to ensure that you don't alert them to your presence. They're fast, they're powerful and the best way to evade them is to reach well-lit safe zones. Chases are especially harrowing, and there's an imposing sense of helpless momentum to them – you're able to look behind you as you run, keeping a fearful eye on your pursuers as you scramble for safety.

Beyond the story, my only real complaint with the game isn't really a complaint so much as it is just pointing out something glaringly obvious: there's very little in *Dying Light* that feels original. Beyond its *Dead Island* foundation, it liberally borrows elements from other open-world games – the capturing of safe zones is very much like clearing outposts in *Far Cry* for example, and there are towers to climb (complete with ziplines at their peak) that are reminiscent of *FC* as well. Technical anomalies exist, despite this being vastly more stable than anything Techland's done before – but there are still instances of enemies becoming trapped in unreachable geometry, misfiring triggers and other such annoyances. In spite of its shortcomings, I'll keep returning to *Dying Light*, and I'm especially keen to give

the four-player co-op a go, which I haven't had the chance to do yet. I love the rush to get things done during daylight hours, and the feeling of inescapable terror that washes over me when night falls and I'm nowhere near a safe zone. The pronounced feeling of verticality and freedom of movement is wonderful, even though it's a bit erratic at times. Most of all, I really dig the simple joys of scavenging for supplies, of bashing zombies in the head with blunt objects, of watching dead things dimly reach up at me, moaning in vain, from the streets below. **NAG**

- Barkskin



80 *Dying Light* is a good game, but not a great one. It's difficult to quantify why that is: all the pieces are in the right place, but it's not really attempting anything special. That said, it's a really enjoyable ride, and I definitely think you should play it if you're in the mood for a fun zombie-laden game.

PLUS / Awesome zombies / Lovely open world / Chunky combat

MINUS / Humdrum story / Quite derivative / Some technical issues

| | |
|--|-----------------------|
| PLATFORMS / PC / PS4 / PSV | REVIEWED ON / PC |
| AGE RATING / 12 | GENRE / Adventure |
| MULTIPLAYER / Local > None | Online > None |
| WEBSITE / www.grimremastered.com | |
| DEVELOPER / Double Fine Productions | DISTRIBUTOR / Digital |
| PUBLISHER / Double Fine Productions | |

Grim Fandango Remastered

Back from the dead

Grim Fandango has always had a special place in the hearts of classic adventure game fans thanks to its narrative depth, rich characters, and impressive game length. At its time, it was LucasArts' most challenging adventure game ever produced, and it's high time that it received the polish that it's always needed to make it the game it deserves to be.

You'd think then that a remaster is the perfect way to give *Grim* that polish, and it does a good enough job, but I can't shake the feeling that *more* should've been done. All of the characters have received a fresh coat of paint in the form of high-res textures that retain their original stylings, so they're sharper but no more detailed, with the exception of a bit of modern lighting. The interface has received its own transformation: players can now control the eternally-damned Manny Calavera with mouse, keyboard, or gamepad, with either camera-aligned or the classic, and horrible, "tank" controls. The audio has received perhaps the most attention, in the form of a completely reorchestrated soundtrack courtesy of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. There's also plenty of insightful director's commentary along for the ride, which is perhaps the best part of this release.

Everything else is, sadly, left intact. Just that is an impressive accomplishment, though; gathering up the assets from *Grim* was a gargantuan task all on its own. But while I appreciate the effort that Double Fine went through to dig up these old assets, I'd appreciate it even more if the background art could have received its own updates. As it is, the improved characters look awful against the low-resolution scenes on which they're placed, and glitches between the two are common. If the backgrounds were improved then the whole game could perhaps have been refitted for widescreen monitors, but unfortunately you're stuck at 4:3 with bars on the sides of the screen, or 16:9 that stretches everything. **NAG**

- GeometriX



82

things.

Grim proves that it's still got the gameplay and narrative chops to be one of the most thoughtful adventure games out there, but this remaster is remarkably light on a few important things.

PLUS / Fantastic director's commentary / Reorchestrated soundtrack / Still a great game

MINUS / Visual glitches and clipping is common / Low-res backgrounds and cut-scenes

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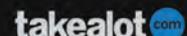
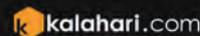
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|---------------------------|--|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| PLATFORMS / PC | REVIEWED ON / PC | GENRE / First-person puzzle game | DEVELOPER / Croteam |
| AGE RATING / 7 | MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None | PUBLISHER / Devolver Digital | |
| WEBSITE / www.croteam.com | | | DISTRIBUTOR / Digital distribution |



The Talos Principle

Collecting Tetris pieces has never been such a soul-searching experience

Yes, *The Talos Principle* is a first-person puzzle game made by the same people who gave us the mindless extravaganza that is *Serious Sam*. It's a bit perplexing, even more so because *The Talos Principle* is actually a damn good game, especially in a sea of similar, lacklustre titles attempting to cash in on the success of *Portal*.

Players are placed in the role of an android who awakens in what appears to be the ruins of an ancient garden. Guided by an unseen, omnipresent voice who identifies himself as Elohim, the android sets out to prove himself worthy by solving puzzles and displaying the ability to think and reason. It's apparent from the onset that the environment is some sort of holodeck-esque simulation, with Elohim and his unseen henchmen delving deep into

Biblical analogies – especially with threats of destruction should the player break a unilateral “covenant”.

The assorted puzzles see our hapless, sentient machine dealing with *Tetris*-like objects called Sigils, which are obtained using a combination of different devices. One such device is a “jammer”, which disables hostile machinery, while another features a crystal on a tripod which refracts laser beams into key positions. Obtaining certain Sigils will allow players to access new areas or unlock additional technologies by forming the pieces into specific shapes in a very basic mini-game. Besides the Sigils, the world has hidden stars which require even more complex thinking and a keen eye to collect.

True to its *Serious Sam* legacy, the game

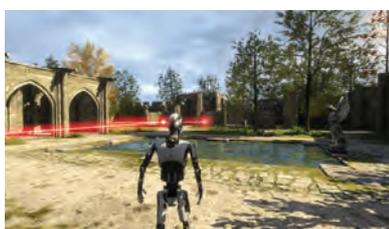
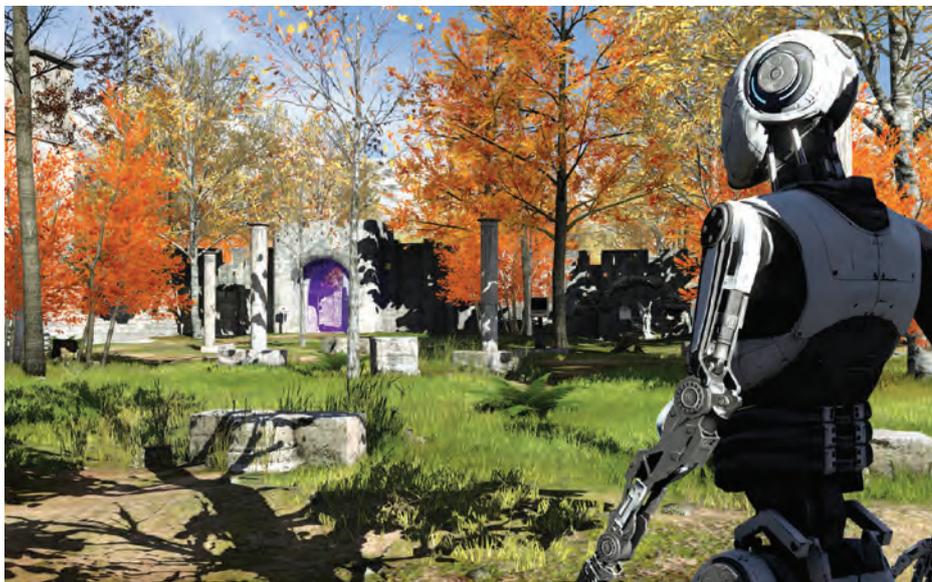


features gorgeous, bright, open spaces set in meticulously-detailed environments. Likewise, it has the same theme of exploring ancient ruins and certain “dead spots” in the overworlds which feel more like showcases for the engine than well thought-out level design, particularly when players have to employ so much backtracking. Audio logs, terminal records and even Elohim’s musings on life and death help keep players engaged, for the most part.

While there are a lot of puzzles to solve, the lack of variety becomes all too apparent before players reach the halfway mark. It also seems many of the puzzles repeat themselves, albeit with an extra hostile enemy or fewer jammers. C'mon, Croteam, did you think we wouldn't notice?

The Talos Principle is a beautiful and surprisingly thought-provoking game that reminds us of just how well a first-person puzzler can really work. Far from *Portal*'s deadpan humour and much more serious, it's a great experience that'll stick with you for quite some time afterwards. If you want to get the cognitive and introspective gears grinding, I can't recommend this game enough. **NAG**

- Delano



90 Finally, a first-person puzzler that might shake the *Portal* games from their lofty perches.

PLUS / Beautiful and engrossing / Great puzzles

MINUS / Gets repetitive about halfway through / Too much backtracking

PLATFORMS / PC

REVIEWED ON / PC

GENRE / Turn-based strategy / role-playing game

DEVELOPER / Daedalic Entertainment

AGE RATING / 12

MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None

PUBLISHER / Daedalic Entertainment

WEBSITE / blackguards2.daedalic.de

DISTRIBUTOR / Digital distribution

Blackguards 2

Life on the grid can be tough

blackguards 2 continues with the precedent that the first game set: it's a turn-based RPG following in the legacy from such titles as *Vandal Hearts* and *Shadowrun Returns*. The question is, can Daedalic Entertainment continue to milk the Dark Eye universe for all its worth?

Familiarity with the previous game is helpful, but not necessary. This time, players are cast as Cassia, a noblewoman whose husband Marwan has some serious issues and orders her to be locked away in a dungeon and her kitten killed [Wut. Ed]. The dungeon in question is a labyrinth populated by rather large spiders whose venom causes insanity in whoever they bite. After four long years and countless bites, she finally escapes, though her face has become severely deformed and there's little left of her mind sans hatred and revenge. Out for Marwan's blood, she discards any notion of morality and enlists the help of similarly-minded ruffians in order to build a sizable opposing force for taking over the kingdom and making her former husband suffer.

Our Tarantino-esque tale of revenge is played out much like any tactical RPG: you



assemble your team of fighters, assign them unique skills and powers, and send them out on their way in a hex-based grid. Trade blow-for-blow with other enemies and the odd monster until you've beaten your opponent. Move a few more grids, repeat the process. Though they offer the illusion of choice, it's apparent from the onset that gameplay is nonetheless linear. Players may tactically use the environment in battle to manage attacks more efficiently, but it's still mostly a case of getting from point A to point B. In fact, the focus seems to be far more on the combat than the journey this time around, making *Blackguards 2* a surprisingly apt gateway

game to the entire turn-based RPG genre. This is even more apparent since combat is a bit too easy, even on the highest difficulty setting. It also suffers from the occasional imbalance.

Curiously, the best part of the game is the characters. Demented Cassia and her equally nasty cohorts are fun, from their obnoxiousness to their descent into madness. It certainly helps that the presentation is pretty – not AAA stuff, mind you, but the dark, painted aesthetics, convincing voice-acting and appropriate music go far to drawing players into this depraved tale. The ability to customise characters is all the more impressive and will consume a disturbing amount of your time and effort.

Blackguards 2 is a decent addition to the growing turn-based RPG base, though nothing revolutionary. Odd though it may seem, I actually recommend playing this sequel before tackling the first game, because it's more streamlined and a lot of the nuances are better dealt with. Either way, you need to play it. **NAG**

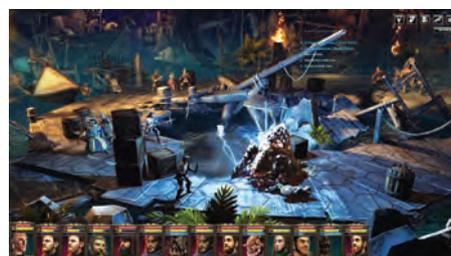
-Delano



80 **Blackguards 2 is, unsurprisingly, much the same as the first Blackguards, just with more combat.**

PLUS / Satisfying turn-based combat / Wonderfully grim story and setting

MINUS / Some battles are unbalanced / Far too easy for its own good





HARDWIRED

by Neo Sibeko

Understanding the GTX 970 bug! More sensationalism than reality.

In late January through to early February there was a discovery made via an end-user program that the much-loved GTX 970 graphics card was behaving in a seemingly unusual way when its entire frame buffer (video memory) was used. Essentially, the last 500MiB (yes this is the correct way of writing 500 megabytes as per IEEE standard) of the physically available 4GiB was performing much slower than the larger chunk of the memory pool.

The tool used to investigate this was a somewhat simplistic CUDA-based compute program which claimed as its primary purpose was the measurement of GPU frame buffer performance. The program showed relatively linear performance figures for the first 3.5GiB, then a dramatic fall in performance for the remaining memory, in the region of 80% lower performance.

The interesting thing here is that this tool isn't reliable at all for such a measurement much like most CUDA programs. They are subject to several layers of API below that only expose a finite resource pool or even better do not represent what is actually taking place at the low level. With that said, the tool was still able to reveal a startling and somewhat worrying facet to the GTX 970's logical layout, especially compared to what NVIDIA had presented to media prior to the launch of the product last year.

Without going into the high level technical detail of what is happening within the GPU, simply put, the GM204 core as used in the GTX 970 allows NVIDIA to turn off specific parts in a way that was previously not possible. As GTX 970s are harvested GTX 980s, the failure in any single GPU isn't always the same. By design the GPU was, if you will, built to be "modular". That is, if for instance there's a failing GPC (Global Compute Cluster which houses a group of the CUDA cores that share resources) or more accurately part of a GPC, not all of it needs to be turned off. Some parts may be working and can be used. Rather than fusing off the offending part completely, the new GPUs allow NVIDIA to just disable the broken parts.

In the case of the GTX 970, the parts that were or are turned off, happen to be tied with other functional units that deal with memory. The affected parts are 8 ROPS, 256KiB of L2 Cache and most importantly here, memory bandwidth. The GTX 970 rightfully has a 256-bit bus, however that bus is only 256-bits between the actual DRAM on the PCB and the memory controllers within the

GPU. From the memory controller upwards (logically), it is a 192-bit bus or a 64-bit bus, at any one time. Never both however. So data can be read from the 4GiB of memory at the standard 224GB/s but only until it reaches the memory controller.

As a result of this, the GTX 970 is technically a 192-bit card, which will always place priority data in the first 3.5GiB that it can access at 192-bits while placing non crucial data in the remaining 64-bit accessed 500MiB segment. If a game requires or allocates itself 3.8GiB or the entire 4GiB for instance, that is where potential problems exist. To read the first 3.5GiB will be quick, but to read the remaining data will be very slow, essentially 1/5th of the speed. How this would translate on screen would be stuttering or large swings in frame rates.

Not an ideal situation at all and certainly one NVIDIA would have done well to inform the media about in the press briefings and technical slides. Having said that, it turns out that there isn't a single situation thus far that can be reliably repeated and tested that has shown unusual scaling in frame buffer use and performance which isn't in line with the GTX 980 which, unlike the GTX 970, doesn't have the segmenting in its memory. That is, the two GPUs roughly scale the same way as you increase the load on each via the frame buffer requirement. Moreover in most situations, if not all that can be tested, the titles or programs that fill up the entire frame buffer are too slow to run as a result of the GM204 just not having enough processing power. Even on the GTX 980, the same settings produce unplayable frame rates. So in closing, the entire GTX 970 memory bug that was all the rage is legitimate only in theory, but in practice it has absolutely no bearing on anything we've come to know and like about the GTX 970. It is still one fine GPU at a great price. **NAG**

Neo insists that he wrote the Cheers theme song in the bath one night when he was feeling lonely. It's been a constant source of agony that the show's creators have never given him the credit he's due.

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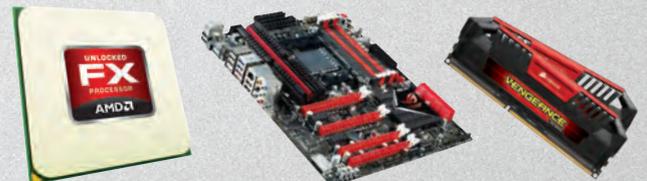


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GIGABYTE GTX 960 G1 Gaming

VERSUS

MSI GTX 960 Gaming 2G

The release of the GTX 960 added another SKU to NVIDIA's 900 series family. This time, the newest addition replaces the GTX 760 which, in comparison to the GTX 780 and the GTX 770, has been short lived on the market. As you would expect the GTX 960 is based on the Maxwell architecture, the GM206 core to be exact.

This core is 2.94 billion gates, and built on the same 28nm TSMC node as all other GPUs in the last two years. Given that the full complement GM204 core that powers the GTX 980 and 970 is 3.5 billion gates, it is suspected that with just half a billion fewer gates, the GM206 core could house more functional parts, but at present are disabled giving us a core that is exactly half that of the GTX 980 in specifications. The GTX 960 has 1,024 shaders instead of 2,048, has half the render outputs at 32 and half the texture samplers at 64. The memory bandwidth has also been cut in half to 112GB/s via a 7GHz 128-bit wide bus. It is in every way, half of the GTX 980 and performance is mostly half of the GTX 980 as well, but just like all other Maxwell cards is DirectX 12 compliant. The pricing however is also half and that is a major draw card for this GPU.

It runs cool, with both cards in this Versus never breaking the 65°C

mark even within a case that has poor air flow. The power draw is also very low at anything between 120 and 160W. Pricing varies but you're looking at anything between R3,500 and R4,200 for the GTX 960. Steep given how the GPU performs, but good enough to play most games at 1080p with the detail levels maximised. These two in particular give performance that is between the older GTX 970 and then sometimes matching the GTX 680. Two cards that retailed for double the price of the GTX 960 when at their debut.

With that said, we picked two GTX 960s and placed them head to head to see how they fared. As usual with these comparisons, buying either one will result in great gaming performance and you'll not be disappointed. If you're looking to maximise your investment though, it may be worth taking the time to read the finer details of each one. Then pick the one that suits your needs the most.



GIGABYTE GTX 960 G1 GAMING

Website / www.gigabyte.com ERP / R4,099 Supplier / Rectron



▶ VALUE

The pricing of this GPU will vary from store to store, but on average you can expect to pay slightly more for this card than the MSI one. It isn't a large amount of money but if you're on a very strict budget, this may sway you towards the other card. This isn't a local pricing difference only as the USD difference between these two is \$20 to \$30. This one is pretty easy to award to the MSI card as it is just cheaper even if the performance isn't the same. With the GPUs being the same, the GIGABYTE card is a little on the expensive side.

▶ PERFORMANCE

The performance advantage is with the G1 Gaming here. It is clocked much higher than any other GTX 960 on the market and this makes all the difference. While other cards are mostly faster than the outgoing GTX 760 overclocked editions, the G1 Gaming is consistently faster. For the most part it matched the GTX 680 reference models and in our testing never fell behind except in two games. Prior to release, GIGABYTE issued a firmware update which amongst some other undisclosed changes resulted in additional performance via a clock speed upgrade. As a result the boost clock is stated to be

1,371MHz, but the real clock frequency during gaming is a scorching 1,445MHz. This makes the G1 Gaming the highest clocked GPU we've come across out the box. This clock speed advantage renders it faster in every game and benchmark and is a very clear and obvious win for the GIGABYTE card. If you're looking for the fastest GTX 960 on the market, the GIGABYTE GTX 960 G1 Gaming is the one to buy. There aren't any that are faster than this one.

▶ GENERAL IMPRESSIONS AND OVERCLOCKING

GIGABYTE has used their latest and most popular Windforce cooler on this model, along with providing their 960 with a back-plate. This not only helps keep components on the backside of the card a little cooler, but it gives the card structural rigidity and helps aesthetically as well. The cooler extends past the PCB making it one very big GPU. This is in contrast to the other GTX 960 from GIGABYTE which is only 17cm long, whereas this one is a hair under 30cm in length. The three fans run very quiet even under load and you're unlikely to ever hear them spinning. The

card features a LED lighting system that will let you know when it's operating in silent mode with no fans spinning or when they are on. In which case the fans would be actively cooling the card. It is the little touches that obviously add to the cost, but overall deliver an impressive GPU that has all the high-end features like the Flex Display configuration found on more expensive cards. Once again GIGABYTE adds a TMDs chip to manage outputs over and above what comes standard with the GTX 960, thus allowing you to connect up to five displays via a combination of DP, HDMI and DVI. At the time of writing there isn't another GTX 960 that supports this many displays or configurations. With overclocking, the GPU managed to complete an entire round of benchmarks at 1,600MHz once again making it the highest clocking GPU core we've come across using air cooling. Obviously you cannot use this frequency to run games all day, but it did hit a milestone and it does speak well about the GPU sorting that GIGABYTE claims it performs on their GPUs. Overall a solid offering and one that is certainly worth spending on.

9



MSI GTX 960 GAMING 2GD



Website / www.msi.com

ERP / R3,899

Supplier / Corex

VALUE

MSI has amongst the cheapest GPUs locally and this holds true for the GTX 960 as well. It retails for less than the others but provides equal, and with the most recent update, better performance than most. It is widely available and the friendlier price means it'll find fans where others cannot. Against the GIGABYTE offering it is cheaper, and that may be the deciding factor for many. Where value for money is concerned this is an obvious winner and MSI has done well to position their product in such a manner that it makes the GTX 960 in general far more attractive than it otherwise would be at competitor prices.

PERFORMANCE

The MSI GTX 960 Gaming 2GD is overclocked out the box and provides plenty of performance for the price. It has clock speeds that are in line with the other vendor offerings but this time falls short of the GIGABYTE card because that one has an extraordinarily high clock speed. For the most part the MSI card matches all the others and delivers smooth frame rates at full HD resolutions and lower. You'll be hard pressed to make

a distinction between the MSI card and others. It is in the upper echelon as it provides a respectable overclock out the box, but much like the GIGABYTE card leaves the memory operating at reference frequencies, which is a pity as that makes a large difference with such a bandwidth starved GPU. Real clock speeds for the GPU are 1,379MHz on the core which is genuinely high. The best part about this though is that this is the clock speed the GPU will keep throughout all your gaming sessions, and not once did we record any fluctuations in the core clock speed. Performance is solid here, but it does lose out to the GIGABYTE G1 due to the 65 MHz core clock deficit.

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS AND OVERCLOCKING

If anything can be said about MSI graphics cards it is that they look fantastic. The red and black still strikes a distinct visual aesthetic that cannot be mistaken for any other graphics card and it works on this GPU like it has on many others before. The white dragon light works well in giving the graphics card some character within the case.

There's no back plate to speak of but then again this is a much shorter PCB than the one on the G1 Gaming and as such the usefulness of such a plate would be diminished. More importantly, the back of the card remains cool even right at the back of the GPU, with temperatures remaining well below the 70°C mark. Overclocking is as always a luck of the draw, but typical of MSI graphics cards the Samsung 7GHz rated GDDR5 performed very well, able to operate a full 1GHz higher than the reference speed. The GIGABYTE card achieved this as well, but it was the limit at which it could operate. This sample reached a maximum of 8.3GHz and the best part about it was that this frequency was game stable with not a single artifact in sight. As a result of the maximum GPU frequency being fairly close, the resulting memory speed advantage the MSI card had meant that it overall delivered higher scores in the synthetic benchmarks when overclocked. In games the differences were 1fps at most and usually less, so that doesn't mean much but overall we would have to say the MSI card overclocked a little better. **NAG**

9

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BenQ XL2430T Gaming Monitor

Website / www.benq.com

ERP / R6,199

Supplier / Rectron

SPECS

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| NATIVE RESOLUTION | 1920x1080 (24") |
| REFRESH RATE | 144Hz (1ms) |
| INPUTS | Dual link DVI, HDMI (1.4a), DisplayPort |
| BACKLIGHT TECHNOLOGY | White LED |



For all the money that is generated via professional competitive gaming one would imagine that gaming monitors would be at the forefront for many display vendors. This isn't the case, even though we have many high scan rate monitors to choose from. Other than that particular aspect of gaming monitors, most vendors ignore or rather choose to walk a middle ground between competitive gamers and casual users.

With the BenQ XL2430T the focus is squarely on gaming. In fact, it is particularly competitive gaming. Not surprising given the vendor's heavy investment into eSports and the deep product line up to match.

The BenQ XL2430T then is by all accounts a standard 24" full HD monitor, offering a 144Hz scan rate along with a 1ms GTG response time. Those properties are perhaps a sideshow to what the monitor is really about. Portability, comfort, configuration and providing endless hours of painless gaming is what this display is delivers.

Physically it is a large unit, primarily because of the vertical mounting arm where the monitor sits. It's solid and is responsible for most of the weight. Besides offering a solid base for the screen, it also acts as a handle by which you are able to carry the monitor. It is responsible for the height adjustment system along with the equally well-built rectangular base that in tandem with the arm are able to dictate the horizontal angle of the display as well. The monitor is in addition to the basic axis of adjustment able to tilt 20 degrees up or down. A very important feature when dealing with a TN panel of course.

With all the adjustments one is able to make, it would be very easy to forget what is optimal for your particular environment, especially if you'll be transporting this monitor from location to location. To that end, it helps that BenQ has provided markers for each adjustment point. You'll be able to line up the red markings, for at least tilt, height





and swivel so you always know what the ideal configuration is for you.

In addition to the above, the XL2340T has a nifty headphone hinge that one may conceal within the monitor. You simply pull it out on the left and hang your headset on it and just slide it back in when you no longer need it. There is plenty to this monitor and BenQ has all their bases covered.

Moving on to the display quality, we found that the XL2340T performed as one would expect from a white LED backlit TN display. That is, looking at it from angles that veer too much from dead centre will result in colour distortion especially where whites are concerned. There was some banding from the bottom to the top of the screen going from a yellowish hue right up to a pale white, in very distinct gradients. This isn't out of the norm though and it is witnessed in other high scan rate TN displays. With some adjusting one is able to configure the display just right to eliminate most issues that would detract from the image. With some dedication and tuning, you'll manage to find the right settings for your environment and game.

The best thing about it all is that through the comprehensive software

that BenQ provides, you can save multiple settings which can be switched between at a click of a button. If you are looking for an even more seamless transition between modes you may use the provided software to trigger a particular profile when you start a specific game. It is with such care and effort that BenQ has produced a feature packed monitor that has all the bells and whistles you would expect from a high-end full HD monitor today. If you're worried about your stereoscopic gaming support, rest assured that this monitor supports 3D Vision as well (obviously at 120Hz maximum), thus you won't have to sacrifice that in order to benefit from the XL2340T. Be advised however that some modes and settings are not available when using 3D Vision and in some cases, they will not produce the desired effect, so caution and experimentation is necessary. It is after all not officially supported on this model.

The XL2340T is expensive by 1080p monitor standards. That doesn't mean it is not worth the price, because for a professional gamer, it most certainly would be. It is such a focused product, that it makes no compromises in that regard. It is not meant for design, or CAD

work. It's specifically for gaming and the plethora of options made available to you for tuning make this very clear. Gaming at a high scan rate is as always, a pleasurable experience. With all the buzz around frame-timing with FreeSync and G-Sync, one would think this is what all gaming monitors are likely to be selling. With such a monitor those technologies, while always welcomed, don't make much of a difference. For the most part few games will be able to exceed the 144fps rate of this monitor and thus enabling v-sync reduces some of the tearing or judder that one would otherwise suffer from with a regular 60Hz display.

As far as gaming monitors go they don't come much more focused and use-specific than the XL2340T. The great thing about many of the features on this model is that they are present on the other high-end models as well, thus you've little to no reason to leave the BenQ fold should you want a QHD display for example or perhaps even a UHD monitor. In our opinion, this is amongst the best gaming monitors that have ever been produced and it's easy to tell just how much input came from professional gamers. Once again the price is steep, but you are paying for a high-quality premium gaming monitor here. It was never going to be cheap to begin with. Given that it can actually give you a competitive edge, it just may be worth investing in.

The XL2340T is one very serious monitor for the professional gamer and it performs admirably in just about every game you can throw at it. Should you be in the market, do consider this one as you're unlikely to be disappointed. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko



Fantastically built professional gaming monitor with plenty of features and usability options.

PLUS / Low blue light technology / Ample configuration options / Material build quality / 144Hz scan rate

MINUS / Image needs manual tuning for best results / Limited viewing angle without image distortion

GIGABYTE X99-SOC Champion

Website / www.gigabyte.com

ERP / R5,499

Supplier / Rectron

SPECS

| | |
|-------------|-------------------------|
| CHIPSET | Intel X99 |
| MEMORY | 4x 280-pin DDR4 |
| CPU SUPPORT | LGA 2011-v3 |
| EXPANSION | 4x PCIe 16X, 4x PCIe 1X |
| SIZE | ATX |



For years on end, GIGABYTE's orange and black overclocking boards have been legends of sorts within the community. From the original X58-A right up to the latest X99-SOC Champion, they have always been met with great expectations and for the most part they have risen to expectations.

Unfortunately as we had feared when the X99 chipset was introduced, most vendors including GIGABYTE had a good motherboard, but there was the Rampage V Extreme which stood lightyears ahead of the rest. It seemed we were destined to have a repeat of the X79 lifecycle with no alternatives to a single motherboard, forcing everyone to either buy that or pretty much give up on the platform as a whole.

Fortunately, GIGABYTE had been working on a better motherboard, the X99-SOC Champion. This motherboard was in the works for a very long time, in fact as soon as four weeks after the launch of the chipset, this was the motherboard that was set to supersede the X99-SOC Force, which is still the premium X99 motherboard from GIGABYTE on retail shelves. How the SOC Champion is different isn't obvious for the most part. One is likely to notice the lower price, simpler layout and perhaps a few buttons missing from the OC button area which was previously laden with all kinds of switches and diagrams.

The motherboard is stripped down, in fact it only has four memory banks as opposed to eight. Where previous motherboards packed as much as they could onto their offerings this one is sparsely populated, ticking only the basic boxes such as offering SATA Express connectivity (as single port), the usual SATA 6Gbps ports, a single M.2 2280 expansion slot and the ALC1150 powered audio we've seen on every GIGABYTE motherboard of late. There's a single Intel Gigabit LAN controller, support for a PS2 mouse and keyboard and only four USB 3.0 ports at the rear, with the other

two sticking to the normal USB 2.0 spec. There's no quick BIOS flashing button, there's no CMOS reset at the rear; in truth this motherboard is pretty barren.

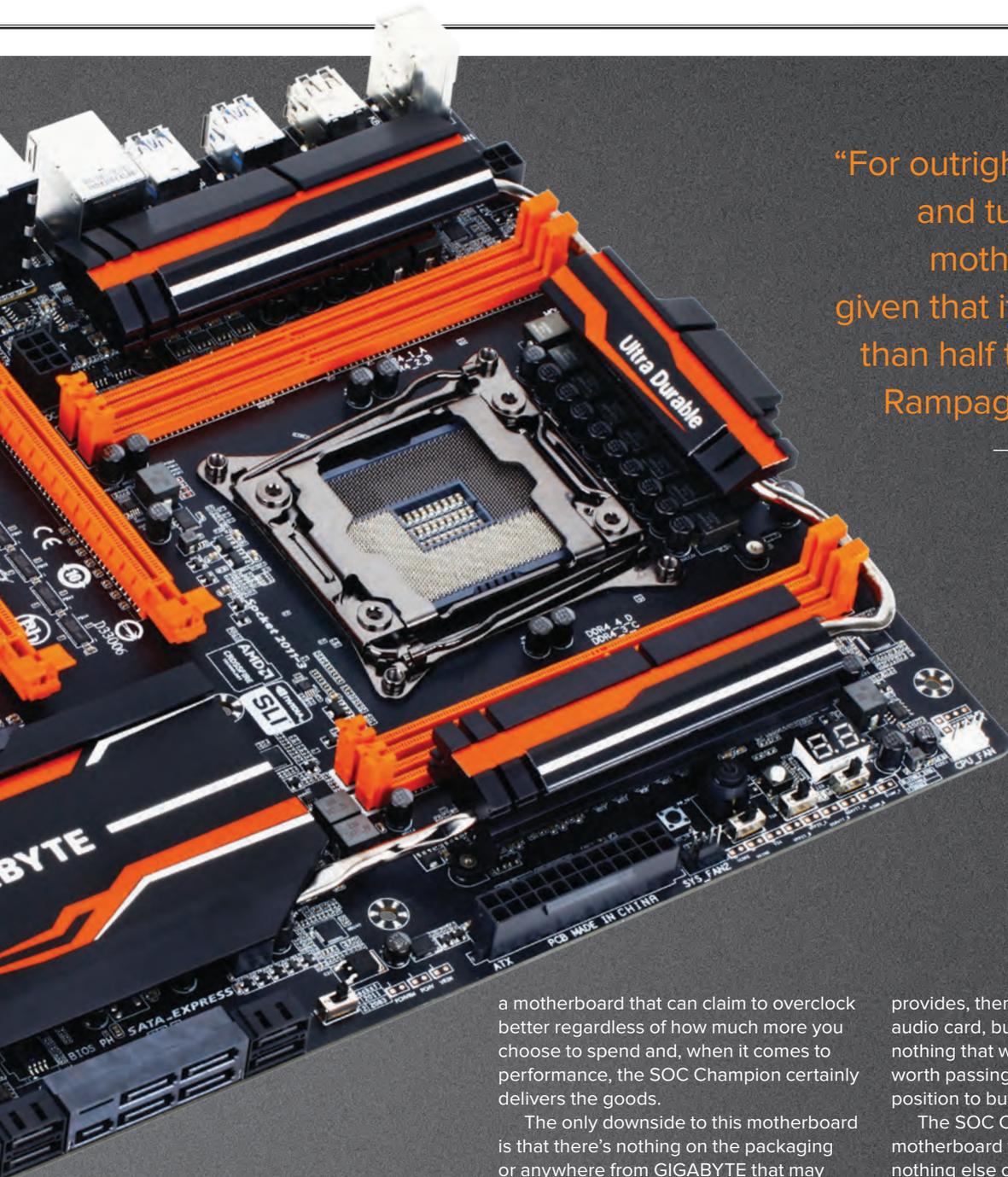
Yet, despite all this there's one switch which gives it all away that this is the X99 motherboard that rivals the Rampage V Extreme and in many ways is actually far better. There is an OC-Socket switch at the edge of the board where your graphics card would extend to essentially. This switch makes it possible to select which socket you choose to use, be it the standard 2011 pins or the enhanced 2083 pin socket. This may come as a surprise to you but there are more than 2011 pads on the underside of all 2011-v3 CPUs. These pins were previously unused and general consensus was that these are not necessary as they are for debugging and various other testing that Intel would perform on their CPUs. It turns out that these may be useful for overclocking related endeavours. This doesn't mean the normal socket one finds on every other motherboard is lacking – they are not. It's just that if you really want to push the CPUs on the platform these additional pins may make it much simpler.

For instance the SOC Champion much like the Rampage V Extreme, will allow northbridge clocks above 4GHz and if the CPU is cooled with dry ice and even better, liquid nitrogen, this may see frequencies in excess of 5.6GHz. This clock makes a massive difference in synthetic benchmark

scores and has a real tangible effect on the available system bandwidth. On the previous boards this was limited to 3.5GHz, but even with air coolers, the SOC Champion allows one to reach speeds up to 4.5GHz depending on your particular CPU sample.

Matching this newfound ability to overclock is the memory frequencies which the SOC Champion is capable of reaching. At the time of writing it was the only motherboard that had managed to validate and operate memory at 4GHz across all four channels in tandem. Usually memory overclocking feats or achievements are performed with only a single stick of memory occupying a single channel which is great, but doesn't speak of the motherboard's ability to overclock very well in the hands of an amateur, or





“For outright performance and tuning this is the motherboard to buy given that it retails for less than half the price of the Rampage V Extreme...”

even stability. Having it run 4GHz on all four channels is a feat that at the time of writing had only been achieved on this motherboard. For more realistic, everyday usage scenarios, the SOC Champion is more than capable of operating memory at 3,333MHz. It truly is a remarkable motherboard, which does away with so many luxuries, and instead gives the highest overclocking headroom and flexibility.

For outright performance and tuning this is the motherboard to buy given that it retails for less than half the price of the Rampage V Extreme in the markets where it's been made available. It is without question the motherboard to buy for competitive overclocking or if you're one looking to maximise the performance of your 2011-v3 CPU. You're not going to find

a motherboard that can claim to overclock better regardless of how much more you choose to spend and, when it comes to performance, the SOC Champion certainly delivers the goods.

The only downside to this motherboard is that there's nothing on the packaging or anywhere from GIGABYTE that may suggest to one that this is actually the company's highest performing X99 motherboard. Looking at the SOC Force, and the other boards from the Ultra Durable range, it's easy to overlook it and pick the others especially because they have many more features and a higher price tag. You would however be doing yourself a disservice if performance is what you are after. We would gladly sacrifice everything else that is offered on the alternatives for a chance to maximise the performance of the platform on this board because it really does deliver there and it is very simple to configure. With memory kits getting faster by the quarter, this motherboard will be able to handle them just fine and there will be no artificial bottleneck as there would possibly be with the other boards. If you're in need of better audio than what this motherboard

provides, then you may look at a discrete audio card, but there's pretty much nothing that would make this motherboard worth passing up on should you be in the position to buy it.

The SOC Champion is truly a motherboard worth owning and there's nothing else on the market quite like it. This is easily the fastest and most exciting X99 motherboard we have come across to date. It is a definite must-have. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko

9 There are only two X99 motherboards worth buying for overclocking and this is one of them at less than half the price of the other.

PLUS / Memory and Uncore overclocking / Simple layout with plenty of features / Potentially low price

MINUS / Finessy early BIOS versions

Razer BlackWidow Ultimate Chroma

Website / www.razerzone.com

ERP / R1,700 Supplier / Corex

| | | |
|-------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| SPECS | KEYS | Razer Mechanical Switches, backlit |
| | ANTI-GHOSTING | Up to ten simultaneous key presses |
| | INPUTS | 1x USB, 3.5mm jacks for audio and mic |
| | MACRO KEYS | Five |

When I reviewed the vanilla BlackWidow Ultimate a couple of years back, I called it one of the best mechanical keyboards on the market – and that still holds true. Now we've got the Razer BlackWidow Ultimate Chroma, which features all the high-quality design and features of its predecessor, but now has the added benefit of extensively customisable backlighting.

The keyboard itself remains a pleasure to use. Razer's mechanical switches provide a nicely tactile typing experience, complete with satisfying clickety-clacks – although Razer also offers the BlackWidow Ultimate Chroma Stealth, which promises softer, less noisy keystrokes if you're so inclined. Its design is rooted in quality, with only the best components and materials used to ensure that the keyboard will survive even the most violent of LAN-based apocalypses. Maybe. The important thing is that it'll feel like you got what you paid so much money for with the BlackWidow Ultimate. A particularly useful addition is the included USB passthrough, as well as built-in 3.5mm jacks for audio and mic.

Its backlighting is all managed via Razer's Synapse software, which lets you flip between and customise a number of different lighting modes. One mode smoothly transitions between a range of random colours. Another causes a funky wave of RGB backlighting to roll across the keys in the direction of your choice. There's a particularly cool mode which reacts to your key presses, highlighting keys that you've recently pressed before fading to black again. The colour customisation is a nifty addition, but it's obviously not the sort of thing that should make you want to upgrade to the Chroma *right this instant*. It's more like an added extra if you've got cash to burn. Overall though, it remains an excellent, but very expensive keyboard. **NAG**

- Dane Remendes



9 It's every bit as lovely as the BlackWidow Ultimate has always been. Now with added colours!

PLUS / Excellent typing experience / Backlighting options are cool

MINUS / Pricey

Razer Kraken 7.1 Chroma

Website / www.corex.co.za

ERP / R1,350 Supplier / Corex

| | | |
|-------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| SPECS | DRIVERS | 40mm with neodymium magnets |
| | FREQUENCY RESPONSE | 20Hz – 20kHz |
| | IMPEDANCE | 32ohm |
| | SENSITIVITY @ 1KHZ | 112db |
| | CABLE LENGTH | 2m braided USB cable |



When a piece of hardware's selling point is "LIGHTS", it's fair to be a little concerned going in. I wish that Razer adopted a more subtle approach to their Chroma range, because, gosh, this headset is fantastic. The lightshow is really just a side note.

Build quality and thoughtfulness of design on the Kraken 7.1 is good, but suffers a few shortfalls. Everything feels solid where it should be, and well put together. The ear cups fold up for storage and transportation. They don't fold sideways for sitting around your neck, but thankfully the large padded cups are quite comfortable in this form. Unfortunately the cable itself hasn't been given the same attention: it's too short, and with no in-line volume control (or even on-ear), there's no way to change volume beyond the software controls.

When it comes to performance, the Kraken excels. It delivers some of the most impressive amounts of clear bass I've heard from a headset, despite only featuring 40mm drivers. I'd say that the bass is too heavy, but that would be pointless: while it overpowers higher-frequency sounds at its default setting, it never muddies them or causes distortion. You simply have more options to play with. Pulling down frequencies at <1kHz in the built-in equaliser sorts out this issue. Sound isolation is excellent, with the comfy soft-touch pads creating a satisfying (although at first somewhat jarring) vacuum when placed around your ears.

Finally, looking at the Chroma stuff, there's not much to say other than: it has lights, you can change them from static to "breathing" (slowly pulsing) to colour spectrum cycling. There's no audio spectrum analyser tie-in to pulse with the beat of the game you're playing, which I think is a bit of a missed opportunity. Still, you can customise this headset somewhat, which is neat. **NAG**

- Geoff Burrows



8 If you need a headset with outstanding performance, look no further, but a few design flaws hold back the Kraken from greatness.

PLUS / Fantastic performance / Very comfortable / Great sound isolation

MINUS / No hardware volume control / Cable just a tad short / "Chroma" features under-utilised

Razer DeathAdder Chroma



Website / www.razerzone.com ERP / R700 Supplier / Corex

| | | |
|-------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| SPECS | SENSOR | Optical, up to 10,000 DPI |
| | BUTTONS | Five, programmable |
| | ACCELERATION | 50 G |
| | REPORT RATE (USB) | Up to 1,000 reports per second |

Razer's DeathAdder has always been a firm favourite in the gaming world – a no-frills workhorse that does its job exceptionally well. Over the years Razer has improved on the design, like by upgrading its sensor technology, but it's still largely the same brilliant right-handed mouse. And there's now a Chroma edition.

The DeathAdder Chroma is every bit as comfortable as its brethren, and will prove suitable for any style of grip. Rubber pads on the left and right side of the mouse are a thoughtful inclusion, lessening the chance of losing control of the mouse during particularly intense moments. Its five programmable buttons should be more than adequate for most people, and the thumb button placement is logical: they're well out of the way, and I didn't experience any frustrating situations wherein I accidentally hit them.

Lighting is the Chroma's most unique attribute, with separately customisable settings for the mouse's scroll wheel and logo. Using the Razer Synapse software, you can select static lighting from 16.8 million colours or let the Chroma smoothly cycle between random colour ranges. Handily, the mouse can also be synchronised with other Razer Chroma products, so that all your peripherals display the same colour at the same time. Naturally, Synapse also lets you customise things like lift-off tracking and sensitivity levels, and calibrate your mouse's sensor to your mouse mat.

As with the BlackWidow Ultimate Chroma keyboard, the DeathAdder's lighting options are a cool addition, but they're definitely not enough to warrant a hasty upgrade if you already own a decent gaming mouse. It's also not as feature-filled as some of its competitors, which might be a deal-breaker for some people – but at R700, the DeathAdder offers great value for money. **NAG**

- Dane Remendes



9 It's the good ol' DeathAdder, which has gradually been upgraded and improved over the years. Now with added colours!

PLUS / Very comfortable / Chroma backlighting

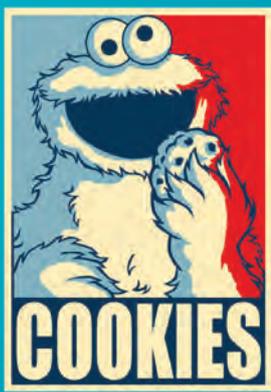
MINUS / Not as feature-rich as other mice

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Astrum BT-032D Bluetooth speaker and charging dock

- Website / www.astrum.co.za
- ERP / R499
- Supplier / Astrum South Africa

| | | |
|-------|--------------------|---------------|
| SPECS | TOTAL RMS | 5W |
| | DRIVER | 2-inch, 4 ohm |
| | FREQUENCY RESPONSE | 30Hz ~ 20kHz |

Doubling as both a charging dock and a Bluetooth speaker, the BT-032D easily syncs with your smartphone or tablet to access the media stored within. It'll also interface with pretty much any device that can output its audio via a 3.5mm jack, and functions as a 2,600 mAh power bank to keep your tablet/smartphone charged up via the built-in USB charging port. Couple all this with the fact that the BT-032D can also manage hands-free calls, and you've got yourself a very useful gadget. Its build quality doesn't match that of more expensive Bluetooth speakers from better-known brands, and aesthetically it's not much to look at, but the audio delivered by its two-inch driver is surprisingly lively. There's an impressive amount of bass as well – so much so that it unfortunately drowns out the mid-to-high frequencies at higher volumes. While the volume ceiling is quite high, there is a fair amount of distortion when the unit's speaker is pushed too far, so I'd recommend dialling it down a few notches to keep the sound clear. **NAG**

- Dane Remendes



7 If you're looking for an affordable Bluetooth speaker that'll do more than just play music, this is a worthy choice.

PLUS / Decent audio quality / Multifunctional / Affordable

MINUS / Audio quality dips at higher volumes

COUGAR 200K gaming keyboard

- Website / www.cougar-world.com
- ERP / R430
- Supplier / COUGAR

| | | |
|-------|---------------|--|
| SPECS | KEYS | Scissor-switch mechanism |
| | ANTI-GHOSTING | Up to 19 simultaneous key presses |
| | BACKLIGHTING | Seven colours, optional breathing effect |

COUGAR's 200K gaming keyboard is solidly built, employing quality materials to ensure that its ultra-slim frame feels sturdy. At only R430, there's fantastic value for money here, offering many features that are traditionally locked to expensive high-end keyboards. There's customisable backlighting (you can switch between seven colour presets, adjust the lighting's brightness and enable a breathing effect), built-in media keys (activated using a function key modifier, which is also used for many of the keyboard's more advanced features), and it even gives left-handed gamers the option to have the arrow keys replace the WASD keys.

The board is pleasantly comfortable during use, with soft, silent key presses that are sure to satisfy anyone who isn't fond of the incessant clacking of mechanical switches. There's also anti-ghosting for up to 19 simultaneous key presses – which is a ludicrous anti-ghosting ceiling, but it's better to aim too high than too low in this case. The keyboard doesn't seem to register all key codes, however, and while that's obviously not enough to prevent us from recommending the 200K, it's nevertheless quite odd. **NAG**

- Dane Remendes



9 The Cougar 200K is well worth a look, whether or not you're on a strict budget.

PLUS / Value for money / Quality construction / Comfortable

MINUS / Doesn't register all key codes

Skullcandy Air Raid Bluetooth speaker

- Website / www.luksbrands.com
- ERP / R1,999
- Supplier / LUKS Brands

| | | |
|-------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| SPECS | BATTERY LIFE | Up to ten hours |
| | RUGGED FEATURES | Water resistant / drop proof |
| | CHARGES VIA | USB |

Rugged design is at the core of the Air Raid's philosophy, and thus it promises to tirelessly endure even after drunk aunt Brumhilda spills her sobering cup of coffee all over it, or after clumsy cousin Steve drops it down a flight of stairs. This Bluetooth speaker (which comes packing two driver units) bleeds quality, featuring an aesthetic inspired by military radios and seemingly only the best materials used to assemble its sturdy structure.

The quality of the audio produced is noticeably higher than most Bluetooth speakers, and it's definitely far louder. It'll easily fill any room or give life to outdoor parties, and it'd be great to take on holiday. The clarity of the audio is remarkable, even at higher volumes – although the mid and high frequencies do tend to muddy a bit when the unit is at max volume. At R1,999, it's extremely difficult to recommend – but considering it feels as though it'll last you a lifetime and that you're unlikely to find a better-quality Bluetooth speaker for less cash, it's unlikely that you'll be disappointed by it. **NAG**

- Dane Remendes



9 It's hilariously expensive, but Skullcandy's Air Raid is a brilliant Bluetooth speaker.

PLUS / Exceptionally loud / All-round quality / Fantastic audio

MINUS / Mids and highs distort at high volume / Expensive

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THE LAZY GAMER'S GUIDE

Marvel Unlimited

WEBSITE / marvel.com/comics/unlimited RRP / \$9.99 (R120) per month / \$69.99 (R820) per year

Now more than ever, Marvel superheroes are in. Like, seriously in. What used to be the realm of the most stereotypical nerd is now summer blockbuster material, and the world of Marvel comics has never looked more appealing. However, with stories and history stretching back almost 60 years, comic books may be a difficult hobby to get into. Besides the prohibitive costs, there are just staggering amounts of series, crossovers, retcons, events, alternate timelines, and reboots, so most of what you'll see on shelves is only the tip of the iceberg. What you need is a massive collection to read at your leisure, something that will let you explore everything you've been missing out on. That's where Marvel Unlimited comes in.

THE INCREDIBLE MARVEL UNLIMITED!

The quickest way to explain Marvel Unlimited is "Netflix for comics". Imagine having nearly every single published Marvel comic book, graphic novel, or once-off at your fingertips wherever there's Wi-Fi. After signing in with either a Marvel Online or social media account (Facebook, Google+, etc.) you select a subscription model and you're good to go. Billing can be done monthly at \$9.99 (R120, at time of writing), or \$69.99 for the year (R820). These numbers may seem large and scary, but those payments get you unlimited access to over 15,000 comics online.

THE UNCANNY LIBRARY

15,000 is a staggering amount of reading material, and it's all quite neatly arranged

and sorted on Marvel Unlimited. If you're stumped on where to start, there's a tab called "Discover" that will present a couple of characters, events, or creators to look in to. There are also weekly editor's picks and popular or new comics will appear on the home screen as well, so you can see what the masses are reading.

If you're feeling brave, you can dive into the library. Here, comics are sorted according to character, series, events, and creators as well. So, if you want to see everything Joe Madureira has done, or all the books invaded by Deadpool, you can. You'll always have something to read, and tracing back a character's origins to the '60s and beyond is fascinating, and Marvel promises that new comics will be added roughly six months after hitting shelves.

THE AMAZING READING MODES!

Actually reading the books is done by one of two methods: full page views, or Smart Panel. Full page is pretty self explanatory: you click an arrow button and one (or two) pages fill the screen. Smart Panel mode shows a little more effort on Marvel's side, as each click of the arrow button will instead show you the next individual panel of the comic. Smart Panel usually works well, showing off dialogue and details too small to make out otherwise, while also zooming out enough when a two-page splash needs to be shown off. Speaking of reading, it's important to remember that most reading will be done online. Up to 12 comics can be saved and downloaded for offline reading, but it's best to keep your data consumption in mind while on a *Deadpool* binge.

CIVIL WAR! PC VS. MOBILE!

Marvel Unlimited is readable on either PC or via a mobile app. The mobile app comes highly recommended over PC, and the two versions actually feel like entirely different beasts. PC has longer loading times, a clunky interface, and occasionally blacks out the dialogue from speech bubbles. However, it is the best version to use for managing your to-read list of comics, and it has better search options.

The mobile app fares much better, honestly feeling as though the service was made with mobile in mind. Available for Android and iOS, tablet or phone, the app is vastly more streamlined to use with shorter load times, intuitive touch controls, and none of the speech bubble blacking-out. Sometimes the app fails to load a page, but the worst it does is have occasional issues with Smart Panel mode and some important panels will just be ignored or cut out, forcing you to swap to page view. **NAG**

SUMMARY

PROS

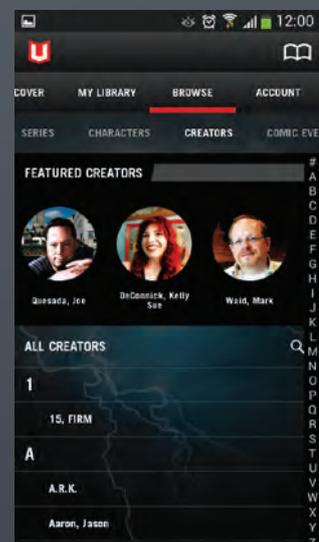
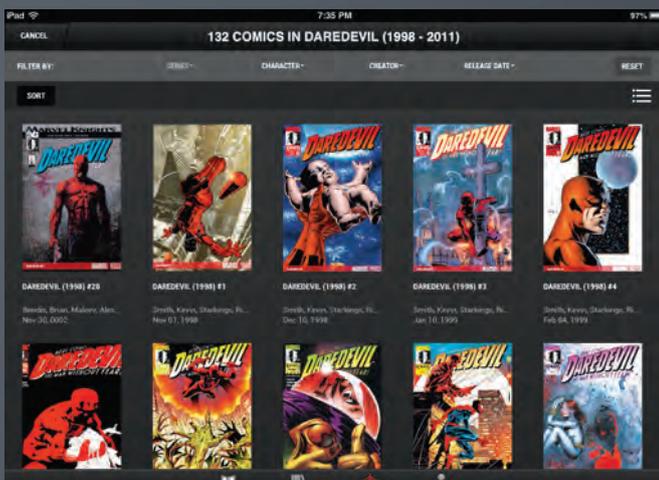
- Great value for money
- ALL THE COMICS!

CONS

- Weak PC version
- Clunky interface

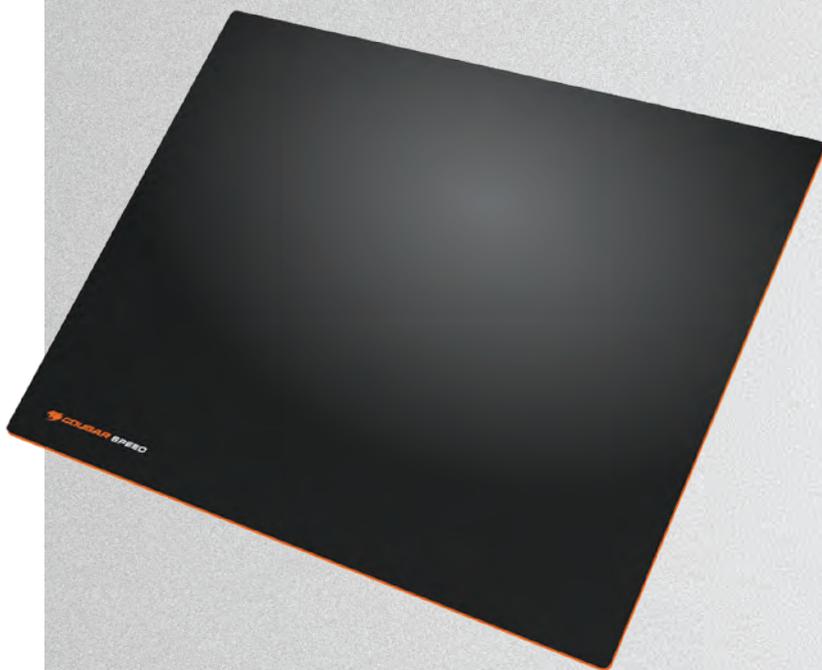
ALTERNATIVES

- ComiXology / Physical comic books



MOSH *pit*

This month's hot list of cool stuff and everything else you simply must have. Well, almost everything.



COUGAR SPEED MOUSE PAD

- Supplier / COUGAR
- Website / www.cougar-world.com
- RRP / R114

If you're on the hunt for an inexpensive, high-quality mouse mat, the COUGAR Speed is an excellent choice. Available in three sizes (small, medium and large, or 260x210mm, 320x270mm and 450x400mm respectively), its surface is made of polyester fabric for a smooth glide, while the orange base is coated in non-slip rubber. The mat is 4mm thick, compatible with both optical and laser mice, and can be quickly rolled up for ease of transportation. It's not the snazziest pad on the market, but it delivers great value for money.

SELFIE STICK

- Supplier / Selfie Stick SA
- Website / www.facebook.com/Selfie-Stick-SA
- RRP / R299

Question – how do I take better selfies with my smartphone?
AnsWER – with this Selfie Stick, of course. It has an adjustable telescopic arm up to a distance of 1,005mm with a push button on the handle for taking your pics. The holder where your phone sits is also adjustable, so most phones should sit comfortably. It is available in five colour options – black, red, blue, pink, and white.



SKULLCANDY 2XL RINGER

- Supplier / LUKS Brands
- Website / www.luksbrands.com
- RRP / R499

A lightweight and stylish Bluetooth speaker that you can take wherever you go to listen to your music. Recharging is done via micro USB, and the RINGER is available in either black or white.



LEAGUE OF LEGENDS PLUSHIES

- Supplier / Playtech
- Website / www.techfixplay.co.za
- RRP / Rammus – R290; Annie (not pictured) – R310; Blitzcrank – R310

If you're a fan of *League of Legends*, these plushies are a must-have for your desk or bed. Between 30-55cm in height, they make good snuggle companions and can be used as a make-shift pillow in times of need. Rammus was our favourite since he comes with a removable hat that can be worn on its own. And also, because Rammus. Okay.



OUTCAST VOLUME 1

- Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- RRP / R169

Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* series, in both TV and comic book format, has been a success, but many fans of the earlier issues of the comic have found the whole series to be a bit of a flop as it's aged. What Kirkman needs is a fresh start, and that comes in the form of his new series, *Outcast*.



This is a bit of a tough book to get into at first: the art style especially, with its low-detail, thick ink-work and jarring CG textures. But the story is intriguing enough to help push one through the rough start, and once you're through, you're in for a treat. Artist Paul Azaceta's style will grow on you soon enough, and it becomes clear that he really nails human facial expressions and body language. Backed by some of the most interesting treatments of light and dark we've seen in a while, and a story that is confident enough to unravel itself at a slow pace, the whole book comes together brilliantly.

ANT-MAN #1

- Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- RRP / R55

Everyone knows that Ant-Man is a hard sell: what sort of hero talks to ants, when the average superpower starts at near invincibility? Thankfully, Marvel has the sense of humour necessary to give Ant-Man the story that he deserves – one dripping with light-hearted self-loathing and sarcasm. This is a comic for people who enjoy something that's not afraid to poke fun at itself, but take the time to read between the lines and you'll see that there's plenty of character depth just begging to be explored. A great start to the series and we can't wait to see what's next.



TEEN TITANS: EARTH ONE VOLUME 1

- Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- RRP / R299

If you're on the hunt for a good starting point for some of DC's biggest names, then the *Earth One* collections are just what you need. *Teen Titans* is the second series to be given the contemporary *Earth One* treatment, and it's a perfect example of how to tell an origin story, thanks to the always impressive writing of Jeff Lemire. It jumps right into the formation of this unlikely group of super-teens, with just the right amount of mystery to keep things interesting. The visuals bolster strong storytelling and deep back-stories with clean, bold lines and modern character art that's sure to appeal across the age range.

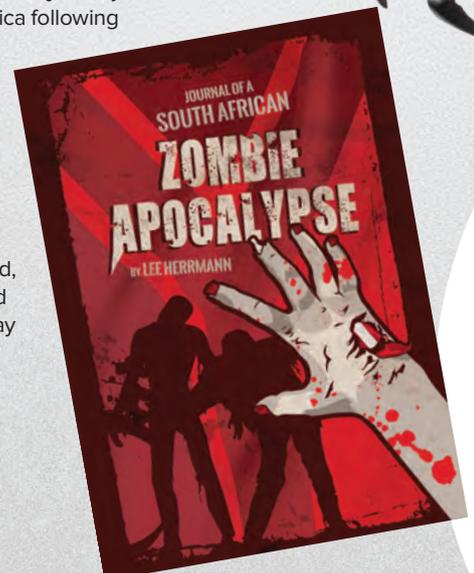


JOURNAL OF A SOUTH AFRICAN ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

- Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- RRP / R120

Hey, it's a real book! With no pictures but all of those word things organised into lines and paragraphs. Don't worry, we haven't lost our minds; this one is about zombies. Phew... sanity reigns.

This short diary-form novel by South African author Lee Herrmann tells the story of a young man and his fellow travelers, and their journey across the wastelands of South Africa following a horrific zombie outbreak. It's filled with recognisable zombie tropes that are gracefully bashed against recognisable South African locations, interactions, and conflicts. It's easy to read, difficult to put down, and entertaining right the way through.



▶ DC COLLECTIBLES: THE NEW BATMAN ADVENTURES: BATMAN ACTION FIGURE

- ▶ Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- ▶ Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- ▶ RRP / R399

This is Batman from *The New Batman Adventures*, which is an animated series based on the adventures of this crime fighting billionaire. There are weapons, a different cape, hands, and a stand for posing in the box – so everything you need, really. The figure is well made and naturally bears a striking resemblance to the character in the series. There are more characters available in the line-up so you can collect the whole set and spend afternoons fighting crime and staying out of the way of other people.



◀ MARVEL SELECT VENOM ACTION FIGURE

- ▶ Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- ▶ Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- ▶ RRP / R399

This is what happens when you start bonding together too many things. The figure features interchangeable heads and arms and can be posed in a number of threatening ways. This version of Venom has an interesting backstory that you can find on the back of the packaging and if you own a similarly sized Spider-Man they can do battle over your little sister's Barbie doll collection. Come on, don't judge – they do it like that in the movies all the time. It's well made, looks good and is immensely popular, from what we've been told.



► **SO FRESH T-SHIRTS**

- Supplier / So Fresh T-Shirts
- Website / www.sofreshtees.co.za
- RRP / R260 each

Ironic mashups of iconic things is the order of the day with these T-shirts. Do you want Yoda tinkering around inside R2-D2 (just don't do that Google search with safe search off) or how about Minion Darth Vader and Leia in a comical pose? The actual shirts themselves are 100% cotton so they won't disappear in the first wash and end up being used for rags in the kitchen. The images are printed on the shirts "using a direct to garment printer" so your options are only limited by how much digital storage there is in the world – pretty unlimited then. So go on, proudly show the world your geek culture alignment and wear these cool T-shirts everywhere, except at formal functions because that says a lot more about you than you might think. Oh, and the purveyors of these fine T-shirts tell us that orders of four or more means free shipping.



◀ **BLEACH KEYCHAINS**

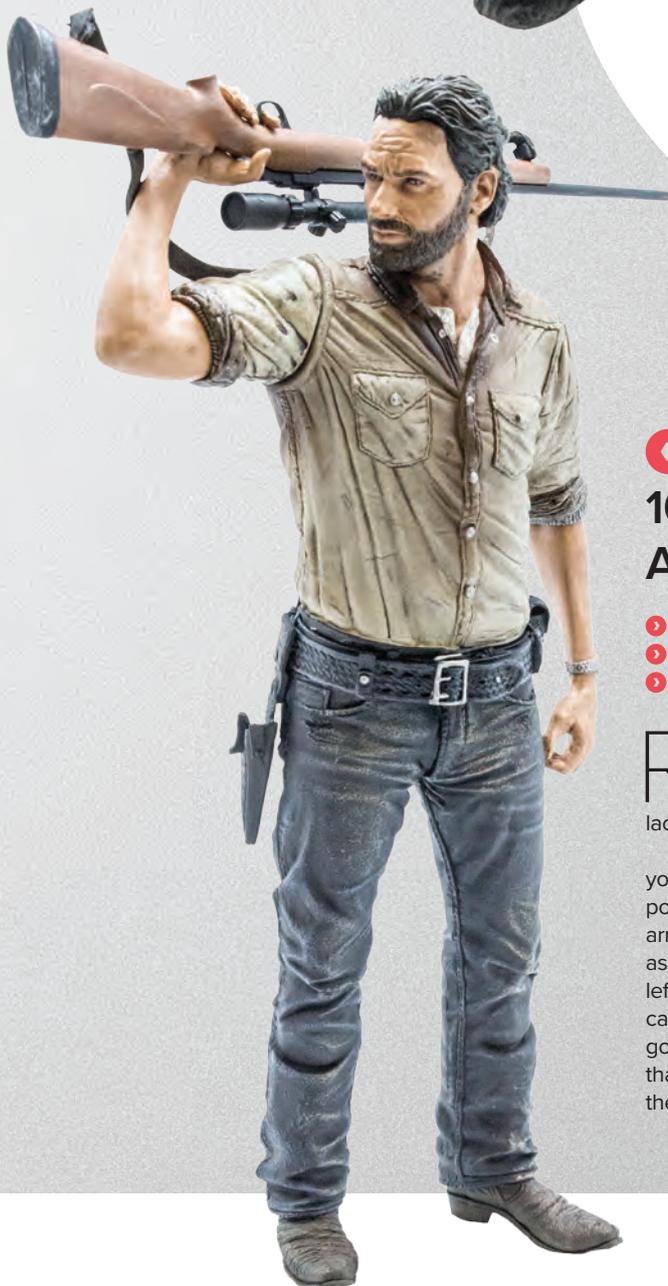
- Supplier / Heroes of Games and Comics
- Website / www.heroesofgc.com
- RRP / R100 each

If you enjoy the *Bleach* anime series and carry around lots of keys, these are perfect for you. They're far more interesting than ordinary key rings in that they need to be unscrewed to attach your keys, and each has a neat emblem that we're sure anyone who watches *Bleach* will be able to identify.

▶ ALIEN BUST BANK

- ▶ Supplier / Heroes of Games and Comics
- ▶ Website / www.heroesofgc.com
- ▶ RRP / R450

Don't go bust during the festive season, or on aunty Jill's birthday, or next time fat Frank comes to visit on doughnut day. Hear that, don't go bust, instead bust open this *Alien* bust bank and bust out the laughs as money comes falling out of that metaphorical busted up dark and dripping overhead vent. Bank your coins and even some folded up notes in this cool *Alien* themed piggy bank. Just look at how far the piggy bank has come, gone are those soft, fat and pink friendly curves and in their place black, evil but still soft (well firm really) harsh edges. The bonus is that kids will be too scared to pry this open with mom's butter knife.



◀ WALKING DEAD TV - 10" RICK GRIMES DELUXE ACTION FIGURE

- ▶ Supplier / Heroes of Games and Comics
- ▶ Website / www.heroesofgc.com
- ▶ RRP / R600

Rick looks like he should take a shower. Geez, guy, we get that it's the end of the world but that's no excuse for the lack of personal hygiene. Gross.

If you can look past the crusty shirts, then you'll find a fantastic statue that's slightly posable. Included in the box is an extra right arm that can hold a pistol (also included), as well as a knife that Rick can hold in his left hand. His surly expression is perfectly captured in this statue and the price is pretty good, so for fans of the series (the TV show, that is: he's missing some "features" from the comic book version), this is a must-have.

GG

by Tarryn van der Byl

Some nights, if you close your eyes tightly and tune your ears just right, you might be lucky enough to hear Tarryn and her army of Battle Cats foraging outside your window. If you spot her, do not make eye contact. She won't like that.



That's just, like, your opinion, man

It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire.

Of course, that all happened a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away – but right now, on Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and every other hive of scum and villainy on the Internet, it's also a period of war¹ even if the mostly anonymous, um, “rebels” of HASHTAG GAMERGATE and their zealously impressive (or impressively zealous, I can't decide) anti-I-don't-even-know-what-anymore campaign against the evil Galactic Empire of people feeeemales who have the jobs they desperately want haven't accomplished anything more than a lot of rolled eyes. I suppose if you're the sort of person who wages a war armed almost entirely with convoluted conspiracy

theories about vaguely defined ethics and feminist space lizards contaminating the Mountain Dew supply with social justice pills (or whatever), then rolled eyes probably counts as a victory.

The point is, the rebels were recently too busy sending death threats to Anita Sarkeesian to even notice a potentially² legitimate target – the marketing campaign for *Dying Light*, starring YouTube Let's Play celebrity PewDiePie's questionably quotable quote:

“I love this game. It's sooo awesome!”

Now, publishers using journalists' review quotes to sell games isn't exactly anything out of the ordinary, except PewDiePie isn't a journalist and this wasn't even a review – and depending on who you want to believe, he was or wasn't paid to say it during a demo of the game at VGX 2013 which might or might not have been an advertorial video solicited

❶ Calling it “civil” is probably a bit much, though.

❷ I'll get back to that.

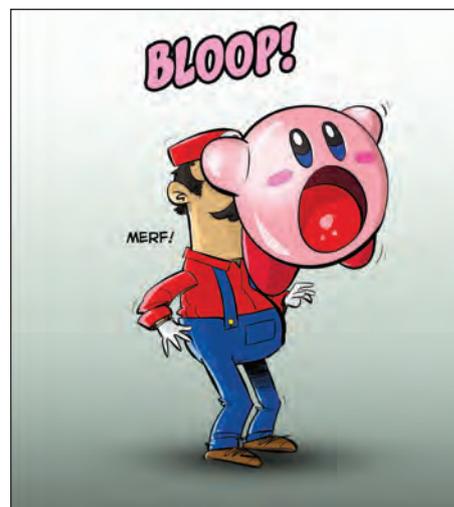
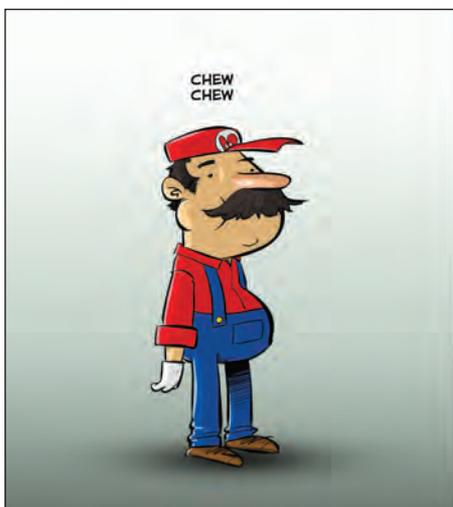
❸ Full disclosure, though, because ethics or something – I shuddered a bit when I typed that out. How somebody with such an annoying voice has managed to get more than 30 million subscribers is quite beyond my comprehension.

by developer Techland. Nobody's talking one way or the other, but does it even matter?

There is no such thing as an unbiased gamer. I'm not sure why this is still a subject of some controversy, but it's an unequivocal if sometimes also uncomfortable fact. As a journalist who writes reviews, I have heaps of my own biases – I like some things, I don't like other things, and when I'm playing a game, those things I like and don't like are obviously going to impact my experience. You can even try it at home, kids. In the end, a review is just an opinion. An honest opinion, I pinky-promise, but still an opinion. And whatever the reader's own biases, my opinion is maybe no more or less important than anybody else's, including PewDiePie³. I'm cool with that, and you should be too. **NAG**

EXTRA LIFE

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