EDITORIAL

We are back again to give your this last month's adventure gaming fix. In the news this issue we bring you the scoop on numerous bundles; Including the latest Bundle In A Box offering, which is so full of awesome adventures at such a delightful PWYW price that no adventure fan should miss out. This bundle, named The Cerebral Bundle, contains *CBE's* latest titles *Vampires!* and *J.u.l.I.a.*, *Cognition: episode 1*, *Reversion: the Meeting*, some puzzlers, an adventure RPG, and a few life simulation games. But the deals do not stop here, there are actually quite a lot of adventure games in some amazingly priced bundles spread all over the Internet this month, every major one outlined and summarized in the following issue.

Of all the new, upcoming, and just announced titles this last month, most exciting to me has to be the release of the second *Dead Cyborg* installment, which can be picked up completely for free. We also have a few general articles related to and on *Ron Gilbert*. As usual, we also saw a few AGS games get released; This month including no less than four by Pierrec; I rather like his artistic style. All of these news stories and many more are compiled in what I think is our best looking news section thus far.

This month we are publishing two reviews from the Cerebral Bundle; *Phantasmaburbia* the RPG adventure game with "clever, satisfying puzzles"; And *Vampires!*, an arcady puzzle game. Additionally, we have reviewed *J.U.L.I.A.* in a previous issue, our April 2012 publication. We are also bringing you reviews of *The Witcher 2*, an action-RPG; *McPixel* an adventure styled comedy game; And *Home*, a simple 2D adventure with a very unique and complex narrative system. Along with these articles we are also continuing our ongoing series of *Myst* articles with a review of *Riven*. Which I describe as the pinnacle of the series.

— **Jonathon Wisnoski**

NEWS

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

UNCHARTED WATERS

Monkey Island Ultimate Talkie Edition

Can't decide between the original and remastered versions of The Secrete of monkey Island and its sequel Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge? Do you think that both have their own positives and negatives? Well now you do not have to choose. Some enterprising, and delightful, individual Marek Roth has designed a way for you to get the best of both games in his Ultimate Talkie Edition builders. these programs take the two pairs of Monkey island games and makes a pair of games with the sound effects from the remakes applied to debugged and improved versions of the originals.

These Ultimate Talkie Editions contain: Higher quality and some additional sound effects from the SE, including the voice overs. Spiffy close-ups. Plenty of original bugs fixed. And no dead ends.

Bundle In A Box: Cerebral Bundle

Kyttaro Games are offering up another series of delightful indie games for a single PWYW price. This Cerebral Bundle will continue until the 2nd of April and features their distinctive Indie Dev Grant (which has been upped 50%) and exclusive content as always.

I will let Gnome of Kyttaro Games and Gnomeslair describe the games for you (with my formating):
Paying anything above $1.99 will get you:
Phantasmaburbia (Windows/Desura) - A deep, retro-esque and utterly elegant RPG.
Dinner Date (Windows/Steam) - Artful, being-stood-up-sim.
Vampires! (Windows/Mac) - Undead infested puzzler.
Necrotic Drift Deluxe (Windows /Mac/Linux) Illustrated interactive fiction exclusive debut.
Dédale De Luxe (Windows/Mac/Linux/Desura) - Beautiful puzzler exclusive debut.

And beating the always humble (heh) average price will earn you these lovelies:
J.U.L.I.A. (Windows) - Sci-fi puzzle exploration adventure.
I Get This Call Every Day (Windows/Mac/Desura) - Hilarious boring-job-sim.
Cognition, Episode 1: The Hangman (Windows/Mac/Desura) - Jane Jensen powered point-and-clicke.
Reversion: The Meeting (Windows/Desura) - Just released dystopian adventure.

Double Fine now Just Fine

The video game genius behind the first two Monkey Island games, among many others, Ron Gilbert has left Double Fine where he had been working for the last two years on, the recently released game, The Cave. He is currently working on some iOS Puzzle Quest type game, and has expressed interest in making a new Monkey Island game, but the right's holder Disney would need to be convinced, of the merit of this, first.

Bundle Stars

A new bundle site has launched two adventure filled bundles. Till April 1st you can pay just $5 for 10 Desura and Steam games including six adventure game titles: Darkness Within 1 and 2; Adams Venture 1, 2, and 3; And Last Half of Darkness: Society of the Serpent Moon. Their newer bundle, available until the 17th of April, is also quite exciting as both Still Life 1 and 2 are available alongside six other non-adventures for $5.

Point and Click Dark Bundle

I am not sure how long this deal is supposed to last, but I thought I should mention the point and click bundle currently on indie-bundle.org. For $5 you can get Cognition Episode 1: The Hangman, Castle Dracula, and Reversion: The Meeting. Additionally for $2 more you can get The Journey Down as well.

Announcements

Telltale Games is partnering with Warner Brothers and DC Comics to create games based on

FABLES

Fables

The upcoming collaboration between DC Comics and Telltale games is set to bear fruit in "the next couple of months", according to Telltale CEO Dan Connors. Fables will be based on the ongoing comic book series by the same name.
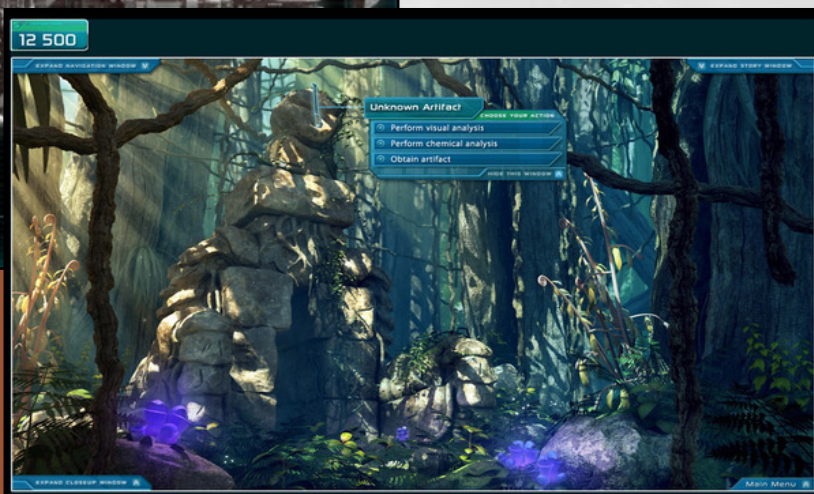
Chains of Satinav 2: Memoria

A sequel to Daedalic's Chains of Satinav adventure, Memoria, has been announced. It will of course be set in the world of Aventuria, and will continue the story of Geron. Together with Sadja, a princess of the faraway land of Fasar, they will explore a piece of the history of their world, revolving around an ancient war between human and demon.

J.U.L.I.A. Enhanced Edition

We all know that J.U.L.I.A. was a pretty awesome 2012 adventure game by CBE software. Well CBE enhancing the game with numerous improvements, including: Recreating Rachel Manners model from scratch; Redesigning some of the game's interface; Making certain parts of the game optional. Rewriting some of the puzzles; Extending some of the music tracks; And Refining a few parts of the script. Currently, they have already exceeded their initial tiny goal of $5,000 and are well on their way to the Stretch goal for extending the game's story. The champaign will run until the 12th of April and for any interested parties it only costs a minimum of $7 to reserve yourself a the Enhanced Edition.
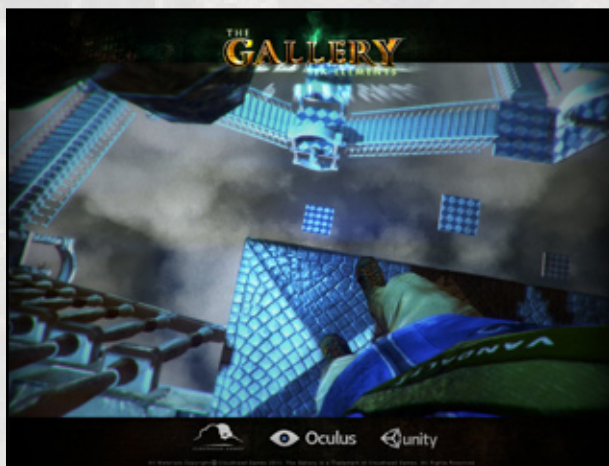
The Gallery: Six Elements

Designed for the upcoming virtual reality headset, Oculus Rift, though playable without, The Gallery is an exploration based adventure game, with semi randomized environments. Inspired by Myst, you will travel to six elemental worlds "to unravel the underlying narrative".

Upcoming Releases

The Inquisitor

The upcoming adventure based on the eminent inquisitor Nicolas Eymerich has teamed up with Microids and shifted its release date to mid 2013 for PC, Mac, iOS, and Android, for its first episode.
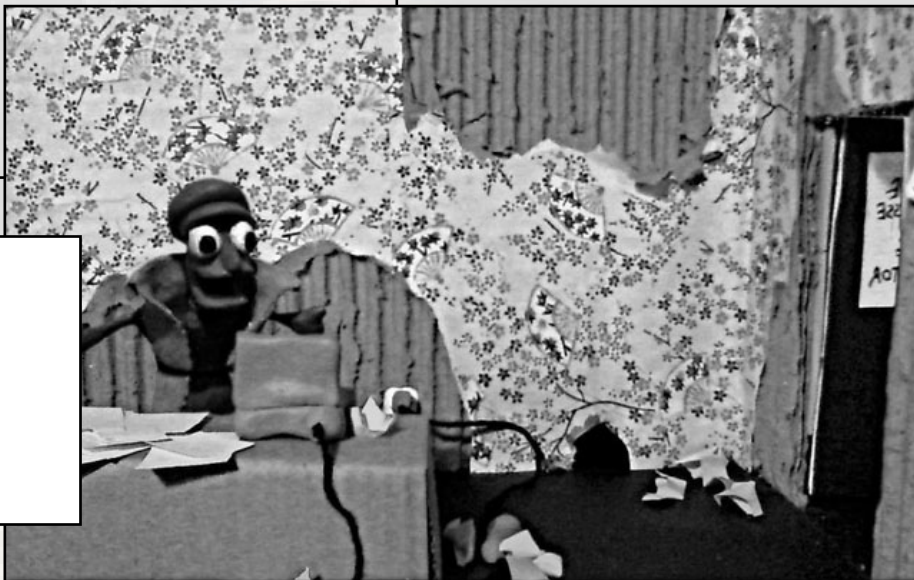
New Releases

Dead Cyborg, Episode 2: In the Death

Episode two has been funded and released, and it is as quirky and personal as the first episode. You can download and play it on Windows, Mac, and Linux. If you enjoy the experience, consider donating to fund continued development. Also worth noting: episode 2, as well as latter versions of episode 1 contain mouse based control.

Dominique Pamplemousse

This film noir, musical adventure by Deidra Kiai has gotten a release date of April 1 for Windows, Mac, and iPad. But if you backed the game on Indiegogo, your copy is already available.

Spend my work days playing Freecell;
Kind of an obsession.

Updated Releases

Lone Survivor

Lone Survivor is coming to the PS3 and PSVita summer 2013, along with a bunch of new content.

News From the Big Blue Cup

Mysteries of Peak Valley: Case 1 The Lost Sonata (Sunny Penguin games) - After receiving a mysterious phone call, psychic medium Zack Gellar travels to a large estate house in northern Peak Valley, where he is greeted by a desperate woman's pleas for help. Seeing that the woman is on the brink, he agrees to help her, vowing to communicate with the spirit that haunts her, and in turn help it to find eternal peace.

Originally written in the form of short stories, Mysteries of Peak Valley: Case 1: The Lost Sonata is the first in a series of 'interactive ghost story' adventure games.

Keys of a Gamespace (Sebastien Genvo) - An expressive game allows you to dive into someone else's life in order to explore his or her psychological / cultural / social problems. You can experience his or her ethical / moral dilemmas and face the consequences that occur of such situations.

Tiny Soccer Manager Stories (Pierrec) - Tiny Soccer Manager Stories was made in a month for the TigSource Sports Compo. This game should remind you you Physical Education classes in 8th grade. In this mathematical puzzle, you're a sport's teacher who tries to make well-balanced teams. It looks like a mathematical puzzle, but the important word is in fact: Stories.

Cassandra (Pierrec) - A small graphical and musical experimentation, made for the Game Prototype Challenge 16. There is nothing to understand except the rules.

Guy Who Landed on Weird Red Planet (RaGG) - Short story of a guy, who was forced to land on weird red planet. Explore the world! Face the ghost! Bash my grammar!

Perelman (DavidMcNamara) - It is just an ordinary day at your office. In order to relax you begin to chat with a friend of yours, as suddenly the adventure begins... A stranger turns up and asks you for help so you have to decide whether to trust him or not. You will have to solve puzzles and follow his leads. But are you doing the right thing?

Richard & Alice (Denby Raze) - A mystery story about family, desperation and the weather, set to the beat of an indie adventure game.

Ok...Now this is Awkward! (Pierrec) - Don't you hate these moments when someone you don't recognize at all talk to you like if you were the greatest friends ? Amy too. This game was made for Ludum Dare 23, theme : Tiny World. It was inspired by Garfunkel and Oates' song : I Don't Know Who You Are and by the Human Traffic's bar scene.

The Quite Annoying League (Pierrec) - Being annoying is easy. It's accessible to everyone. Being quite annoying on the other hand is a real challenge. You need to strongly bother your victims, but just not enough to allow them to reproach you anything. Only those who can maintain this perfect balance might be admitted in the Quite Annoying League! Those are the worse villains! The game was made for LD#25 and ended up 12th.

1st
5
10
15
20
25
30th

Pick of the Month:
January - Horse Park Fantasy

Rear, train and race a few fine stallions in this imaginative simulation that shows AGS isn't always about traditional adventure games. A little patience will pay off as the coin begins to stack in your favor! Horse Park Fantasy exposes the potential for micromanagement games with the engine, and it's just good, clean fun!
(At the expense of 5 coin)
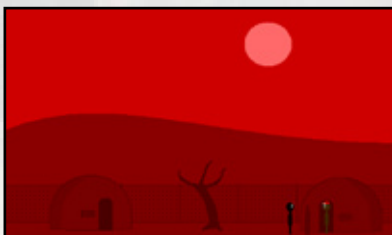
(Chosen by mods)

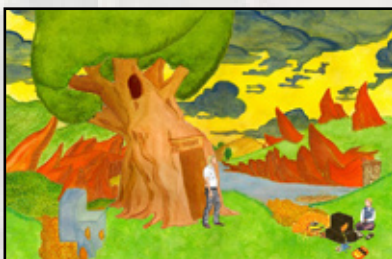**Richard & Alice**
(Denby Raze)
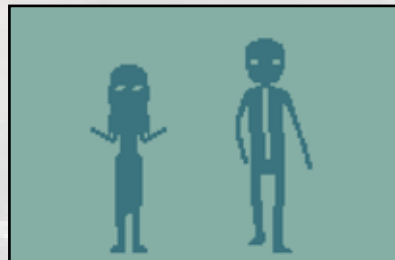
The Quite Annoying League

Guy Who Landed on Weird Red Planet (RaGG)

Tiny Soccer Manager Stories

Keys of a Gamespace
(Sebastien Genvo)

Cassandra

Mysteries of Peak Valley: Case 1
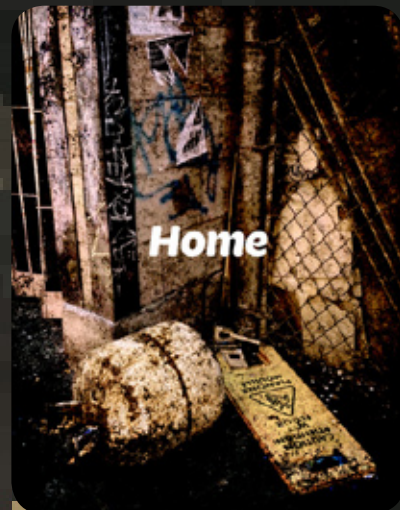**The Lost Sonata**
(Sunny Penguin games)

Perelman!
(DavidMcNamara)

Ok...Now this is Awkward!
(Pierrec)

Home

A short 2D horror narrative video game created by *Benjamin Rivers*. It was released on June first for $2.99 over Steam, with pre-orderer saving a whole 30% off that price and being provided the chance to order a $20 physical bundle.

Review by Jonathon Wisnoski

Home is a sort of a cross between an adventure game with very minimalistic gameplay and a visual novel. Looking at it from an adventure game perspective, it is obvious that no real gameplay exists; Just a series of story shaping decisions. But that is put on its head if you look at it as a visual novel, as it obviously contains the gameplay elements of walking, interacting, examining, and using items like you would expect from an adventure game. So I would say it is a synergy of the two, and takes some of the better elements of both. You get to immerse yourself in an audio-visual experience and actually see the protagonist play through the story. But at the same time the game is story driven and very flexible in how the story plays out. Because of all this flexibility a few bugs have crept into the story telling. On a few occasions the game does forget something you have seen and the in-game text just does not make sense based on your experiences.

While you play through the game you make a series of decisions and miss or see different things; Changing both latter events in the game and your interpretation of the story. In an interview

the developer once said: "It's not choose-your-own-adventure, it's make-your-own-adventure.", and I think this is a very apt say to put it. There is not X number of endings, and one or X number of interpretations; You play through and have to draw your own conclusions from a gradient of experiences.

In *Home* you wake up in a dark house you do not recognize. A flashlight is at your side, you pick it up and go exploring or just start looking for a way out and back home. Along the way you uncover what happened to lead up to you waking up in that house, or at least one subjective version of the story. Home is a game about making your own story based on what you uncover and what you do not, and how the story changes based on your previous choices.

The game does not feature any real gameplay and you cannot die, meaning it is not a survival horror, so how does it scare you? Well, first off, the game recommends you play through completely in one sitting, which should take you approximately 1.5 hours; I think this is very important, and normally I would not buy into this type of thing. Then it relies on the atmosphere and the story to scare you, and succeeds wonderfully. With its minimalistic soundtrack, comprised mostly of understated background noise, and similarly minimalistic graphics, the game creates an immersive atmosphere of dread. When coupled with the story this is a dread of what might be lurking around the next corner and what you might find. As the game progresses the tension of imminent physical danger slower deteriorates, but is replaced by the dread of finding what you don't want to find; Uncovering skeletons that might better of been left forgotten.

Home's presentation is extremely simple. The soundtrack is muted and atmospheric, and sometimes only ambient noises. The graphics are

minimalistic pixel art, with only a circular area visible at any one time, representing the area the flashlight reveals. It is so minimalistic many things are just barely recognizable and not in and of themselves scary; It is very abstract, it gets the style and structure across, but not much else. The controls and gameplay match this with simple left/right movement and an interaction button. You can pick up and use items, but there is

no inventory, so all usable items are, or work like, keys. The story text is told through silent movie style screens, and, quite ingeniously, inbetween scenes little 3D animations are shown of you climbing ladders, opening doors, etc., which really adds to the atmosphere.

Home is a unique experience and an interesting genre blender. With minimalistic presentation and gameplay, and an involved and variable story, it in an experience worth enjoying. ●
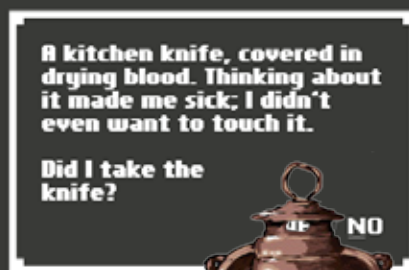
BRIGHT MOMENTS:
The unique gameplay, and subjective story telling.

FUMBLES IN THE DARK:
The game's few minor bugs.

VERDICT:
A unique genre bender.

McPixel

McPixel is a 2012 video game by the indie developer *Mikolaj "Sos" Kaminski*. It is advertised as an old-school point and click adventure where you are given 20 seconds to prevent stuff from blowing up. The game first gained popularity because of its quirky style through "Let's Play" videos, its community, and its creator promoting the pirating of his game on *The Pirate Bay*; Prompting his game to be the very first game endorsed by *The Pirate Bay* on their newly created platform *The Promo Bay*. All of these promotions eventually lead to *McPixel* being the very first game to be released through Steam Greenlight.

Review by Jonathon Wisnoski

The gameplay does use a minimalistic point and click style. You can interact with objects and people, as well as pick up objects and proceed to then use them on other hotspots. Where it is different is the level layouts; Adventure games only function because there is some sense to your actions, you interact with the environment in some way that is moderately realistic which

produces a predictable result. *McPixel* does not even try to be predictable or realistic. But, the game is not structured like any other point and click game either, instead you play a series of mini-levels. These mini levels often contain a single object and a very small handful of interactive areas. But there is more, you are only given 20 seconds per try, and all solutions are instant death except for the single correct one. This senseless gameplay is supposed to be humorous, but I do not get the joke.

The graphics of *McPixel* are basic pixel art, and the interface is very minimalist. There is also an upbeat soundtrack, which is also available for free on its website. All of this seems to me like very good accompaniment for what *McPixel* is trying to do. These graphics are very utilitarian; Pretty much the bare minimum of detail to get the structure accost. They are all-round good, but nothing outstanding of beautiful. The game levels are made up of a variety of locations, but they all contain some sort of explosive. You go around peeing, kicking, hitting, and killing (as well as a plethora of more mundane actions) things and people, all in your quest to stop the explosive from destroying the area.

I do not understand *McPixel*. Maybe a game with a similar format but with predictable and logical puzzles mixed in the silly hilarity would be a great adventure game, but as it stands now it just annoys me to play this game and I do not even think that it is classifiable as an adventure. To me it does not seem to even try to be an adventure game, and I cannot understand why someone would want to spend approximately three hours of their life clicking random objects together. OK, you peed on a guy and then the building exploded again; How is this even supposed to be funny or enjoyable?●

BRIGHT MOMENTS:
It is very unique.

FUMBLES IN THE DARK:
Its limited appeal and complete lack of actual gameplay.

VERDICT:
I just do not get this game, at all.

Riven
The Sequel to Myst

Genre: adventure **Developer:** Cyan **Publisher:** Red Orb Entertainment
Release date: October 29, 1997 **Platforms:** Windows, Mac OS X, PlayStation, Sega Saturn, Pocket PC, iOS **Website:** http://www.cyanworlds.com/products/riven.php

The *Myst* franchise began with the release of *Myst* in 1993; Since then twenty years have passed and the series has expanded to include five main titles as well as a spin-off series and numerous peripheral games. The jewel of the entire franchise is undeniably *Riven*; For *Myst* fans, in my experience anyways, *Riven* is considered indisputably the best game in the series. Where *Myst* astounded the industry with the best photorealistic graphics to date, and the ability to appeal to whole segments of the non-gaming population like no other game before it, *Riven* created the gameplay that would define a sub-genre and to a large extent the entire adventure industry, while also pushing the graphical tech of the time to its ultimate peak; Graphics that still look great today.

Review by Jonathon Wisnoski

Riven was released in late 1997, a little over four years after *Myst*. It was developed by *Cyan*, and other than remakes and ports it would be the last *Cyan* game to be released for six whole years. Also, while both *Riven* and *Myst* were commercial successes, *Riven* was really the end of *Cyan*, at least *Cyan* as it had been up to that point. Many of the main developers no longer wanted to work on Myst-likes, and in fact many of them left to find other companies and projects to work on; The ones who remained turned their attention to the ill-fated massively multiplayer online adventure *Uru*, or *Mudpie* as it was called during development.

In general, and even more than later sequels, *Riven* is designed using very much the same architecture as *Myst*; There are notable and significant differences between the two games, but even more striking and obvious similarities. *Riven* is *Myst* without its whimsical style, and with a far more detailed world and storyline. These improved details are present in every aspect of the game. The graphics are substantially similar to *Myst*, but are simply better and more detailed. The puzzles are integrated better into the environment and objectively more engaging, at least in my opinion. And finally, The game world, story, and characters are realized so much more realistically; It is a real place, with real people, and not just one big puzzle
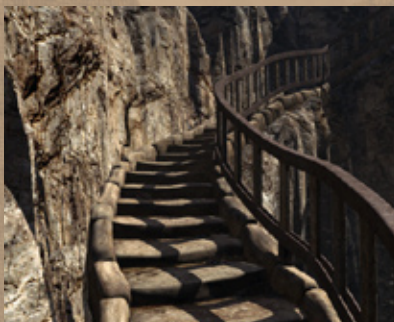
lock. It does have a different style than *Myst*, but mostly it is simply *Myst* as it should of been, if the developers had unlimited resources and time to create it. But the game is considerably less casual; And because of this increased difficulty, as well as the more detailed and complex world, the game is arguably less welcoming to the non-gamer.

Riven is technically much more impressive when compared to its predecessor. For one thing, the owners and founders of *Cyan*, the *Rand brothers*, now had far more experience with these realistic computer generated graphics; Additionally, the huge success of *Myst* had allowed them to hire a much bigger team, spend longer in development, and spend multiples of their previous budget. The result was critically acclaimed graphics and a world that was probably the most realistic detail-rich and photorealistic video game world
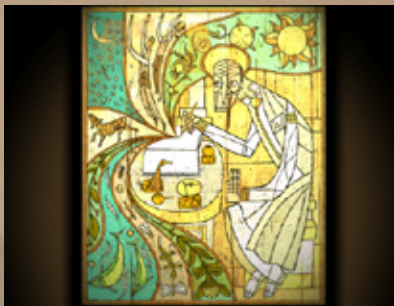
yet created, and arguably still one of the most detail-rich to this day. In total, *Riven* was given over three hours of animation, not even counting a few runtime effects, and nearly twice the number of static backgrounds as *Myst*, almost five thousand of them. For each of these scenes sometimes tens of thousands of individual models, textures, and light sources would be visible; details, such

as individual screws would be fully and individually modeled, and huge amounts of effort was put into realistically showing wear, aging, and rust. This made *Riven* so much more dynamic than the romantic whimsical graphics of *Myst*; It is a real world and one big world instead of the five small puzzle ages that you found in *Myst*. The biggest graphical improvement is the animation; Not only is there a lot more of it, but it looks just as good as the static backgrounds. When things move, they scale and look realistic, as well integrating perfectly with the lighting to show off some visually impressive and complex lighting effects. The cutscenes are also much approved, with a fuller and better script, far better acting, and better integration of the live action scenes into the computer
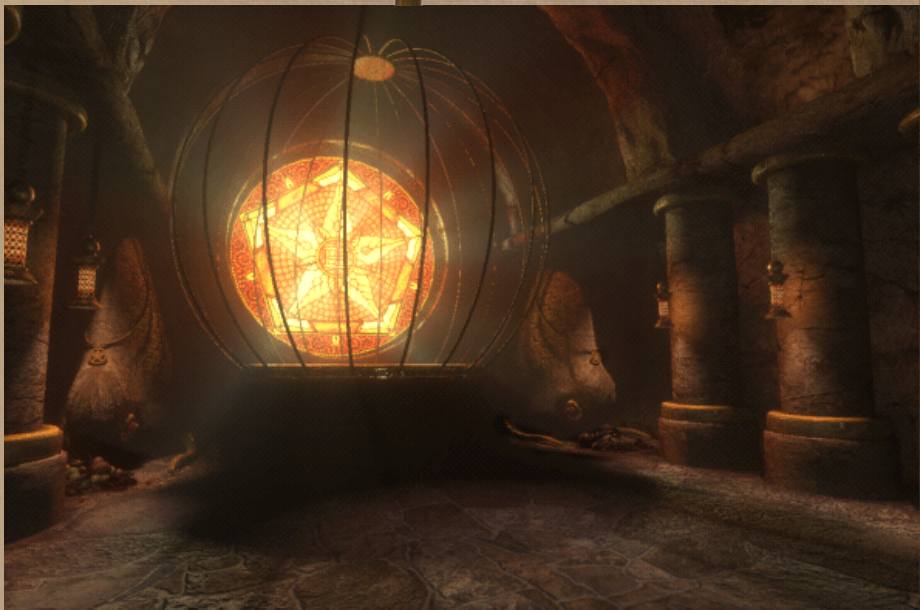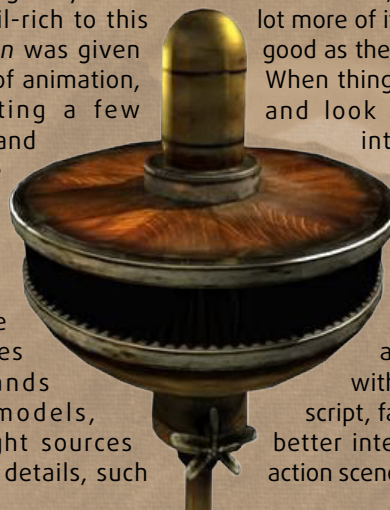
generated world. This time round, *Robyn Miller* composed the soundtrack for *Riven* and produced 54 minutes of wonderful flowing atmospheric music that was tightly integrated into the gameworld.

Riven has far more difficult puzzles, and far more variety, than its predecessor *Myst*. Which is not to say that they are too hard, personally I thought that *Myst's* puzzles were very easy. *Riven's* puzzles, for the most part, are quite moderate; They are substantial enough to take center stage, but not so hard as to ever feel cheap, unfair, or impossible. Which is not to say that *Riven* is in any way a pure puzzle adventure; Every aspect of the game is there to tell you something about the story. But its puzzles are involved enough for it to be one, and you will spend most of your time trying to figure out the solution to a puzzle or exploring trying to find more clues or puzzles to solve. The vast majority of these puzzles are

somewhat complex and involved, but they also stand alone (with everything needed to solve them within easy reach). This makes them decently understandable if you spend a while experimenting and observing. So they take a bit of work, and are not obvious right away, But this just makes them a real accomplishments to solve. The great thing about these puzzles is that they do not require the player to write anything down for them, a common feature of adventure games at the time, though this is not true for a few of the more involved puzzles. These few involved puzzles require the gathering and understanding of information from all over the map. Most famously, there is the

infamous marble puzzle, which is really not all that bad; At least it is logical and makes sense once you put together all the clues. There are also a few more puzzles that are likely to give you at least some difficulty. My favorite is undoubtedly one, that among other things, involves learning the D'ni numbering system; A particularly

no longer contain laughably horrible acting and scripting, so that is a big improvement.

Riven started development directly after Myst was released, taking a full four years to be completed (over twice the time spent on Myst). It also had a budget of over ten times that of Myst, between $5 and $10 US million, with approximately, an additional, $10 million in pre-release advertising. Part of this budget was spent on hiring a huge new staff, exploding their four person studio to several dozen. Also, while Riven uses the same engine as Myst they really pushed it to its limits. The resolution has been increased about 15% (specifically to 608x392), thought it does not have an identical aspect ration. Additionally, the dithering, which Myst used on a per Age basis, is now used separately for every screen, increasing the amount of color diversity and decreasing the amount of actual dithering needed.

Riven has gotten remade and ported over four times; Making it to Playstation, Sega Saturn, Pocket PC, and more recently the iOS operation system. But until very recently all of these has been pretty straight forward ports that featured no improvements on the original. That has now changed with a second iOS release, entitled simply "Riven for iPad", which is in fact a remastering of the entire game with

interesting number system, which turns into a very intriguing logic puzzle when you have to extrapolate the entire system from the incomplete data you are given.
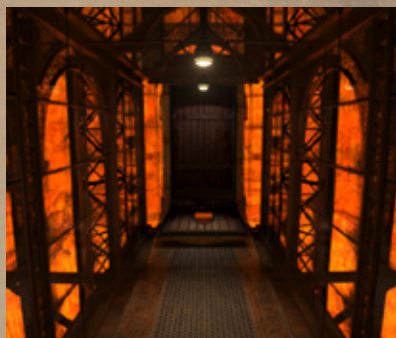
Riven starts off directly where Myst ended, which is you having just rescued Atrus from his imprisonment. But with his wife, Catherine, still trapped on Riven your work is not done. Riven, as the first book of The Myst Reader series explains, is where Atrus and Catherine trapped Ghen, Atrus's father. Atrus cannot risk Ghen getting free from his imprisonment on Riven; So, instead

of going himself, he sends you. He will watch Riven from afar and come get you and Catherine when signaled. This explanation is all taken care of in the opening cutscene, and while there are a few more of these cutscenes scattered throughout Riven, the majority of the story is told through the environment; With many small graphical details making up much of it, but a series of journals really fleshing out the details of the world's history. This story is quite interesting and far more involved than what you got in Myst. Additionally, the cutscenes

improved quality of sound, video, and images (specifically an increased resolution). There are also numerous fan projects that were launched to remake *Riven* in some way or another. The long dead Fissure project, for example, was created to remake the original engine used in both *Myst* and *Riven* in open source, to allow the game to be played on any operating system. There is also the, currently stalled but in a somewhat working state, *Riven* X open source project which plans on remaking the *Riven* engine for Mac OS X. But most exciting of all, and currently running strong, is The Starry Expanse Project, which aims to remake   entirely into a fully three-dimensional experience for PC and Mac OS X; A *realMyst* style remake. This project has already released a demo showing off some of there work, but is far from complete.

Riven is an amazing experience and I would say the epitome of an art form. It is really a perfect example of a Myst-like and perfect at what it tries to be. A playthrough will take you a minimum of eight hours; I played through it mostly by myself in two sittings in about that amount of time, but others have quoted thirty to forty hours as a normal playthrough. ●

BRIGHT MOMENTS:
You don't need to write anything down to complete most puzzles!

FUMBLES IN THE DARK:
None.

VERDICT:
Perfect at what it tries to be. And wholly enjoyable.   ⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐

Phantasmaburbia

Phantasmaburbia is an indie RPG set in a small suburban neighborhood that, overnight, has become host to a large population of ghosts and dark spirits. In the middle of the night, four teenagers are woken up by ghostly disturbances in their houses; seeking weapons with which to defend themselves, they each meet with a friendly spirit who helps them quell the ghosts in their homes. With their new ghost buddies, the four protagonists set out into the neighborhood on their own personal quests, but soon come to join forces to defeat the demon responsible for awakening the evil spirits and casting their families and neighbors into unwaking slumber.

Review by Nick Burgener

The premise itself is pretty interesting, but there's a whole lot going in this game's favor. It has a really nice atmosphere (thanks to the visual design and the music), an engaging and unpredictable story, pretty decent character development, fun battle mechanics, clever puzzles, and several interesting twists on the typical RPG formula. Certain elements of the game even remind me of *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. And with a single playthrough lasting 10-12 hours, with good pacing throughout,

I had a very wholesome, fulfilling experience with *Phantasmaburbia*.

The four main characters are all introduced as different highschool stereotypes; one guy plays guitar and has a huge collection of vinyl records, another guy is a big gamer, one girl is really into reading and writing, and the other girl has kind of an emo/goth lifestyle. They're all woken up by some ghostly presence in their house, and meet with friendly spirits who help them fight the ghosts. The musician who uses his dad's katana meets with the spirit of an ancient samurai warrior; the gamer meets the spirit of a Native

American prophet; the writer meets the spirit of a young boy; and the goth chick meets a confused spirit who doesn't know its own identity.

Each of the characters sets out into the neighborhood for their own reasons (the writer's looking for her dog, the

musician is going to the gamer's house, and so on); in the process of exploring the neighborhood, which now has spectral barriers everywhere and ghosts wandering the streets, they stumble into spirit tunnels -- otherworldly dimensions that connect the realms of the living with the realms of the dead. From there, they start to bump into each other, and eventually learn that they have to stop a demon from reaching its full power before it kills everyone.

Thus begins the main quest of the game; the demon is going around collecting nature spirits, so you have to try to beat him to the spirit tunnels and collect the power for yourself. This is where the game reminds me a little of *A Link to the Past* -- the gameplay becomes somewhat free-roaming, letting you explore the map and search for spirit tunnels on your own. The spirit tunnels are sort of like dungeons from *ALTTP* with monsters to defeat, puzzles to solve, and keys to collect as you advance towards the boss at the end of the dungeon. And much like *ALTTP*, you can complete the spirit tunnels in basically any order you want.

What makes the spirit tunnels fun is the environmental puzzles you have to solve to advance through to the boss chamber at the end. Each of your four ghost buddies has a unique way to interact with the environment; one of them can take control of animals; another lets you trade places with animals; another lets you move hollow objects; and another lets you destroy weak objects. These different abilities get used in different ways to solve different types of puzzles -- in one scenario you're rearranging a limited selection of pipes to direct the flow of water; in another scenario, you're placing orbs in strategic positions to light up certain beacons while not lighting up others.

The puzzles are some of the most clever and satisfying that I've seen in an RPG in a long time. In the later stages of the game they get to be particularly challenging, but they always feel manageable -- never too challenging or abstract to be impossible. They're satisfying because they're a little tough, and because it takes just a little bit of trial-and-error to deduce the rules and the solution for yourself. It's also remarkable how natural they feel in the context of the game -- each puzzle makes sense for the environment it's in, and your way of interacting with the environment (by use of your ghost buddies' unique special abilities) helps tie everything together.

By clearing a spirit tunnel and claiming the nature spirit for your own, you get to imbue one of your characters with that nature spirit, giving them elemental damage bonuses and even more unique special attacks. For each nature spirit you collect, you get to choose who claims its power. But what's really interesting is that, while you're claiming nature

Ginny uses M+J+H

spirits for yourself, the demon is also off collecting nature spirits. When you clear one spirit tunnel, you emerge to find that another tunnel elsewhere on the map has already been cleared. There are a total of eight spirit tunnels, but you'll only be able to visit four of them, meaning it matters what you choose to do in this game, because you'll be experiencing different content and unlocking different specials depending on what you do.

Needless to say, since you only experience about half of the game's dungeons, there's plenty of replay value to be had with *Phantasmaburbia*. When you beat the game for the first time, you unlock "new game plus" mode that starts you off at the beginning again, retaining some of the special items you'd collected in your previous playthrough, and gaining a bonus to your leveling rate. Besides visiting the four dungeons you didn't go to the first time through, you can also work on collecting more roaming spirits and filling up the beastiary at the library to unlock extra goodies. Even in a first playthrough, there's quite a bit of optional side-content to experience if you're diligent about exploring the neighborhood.

As an RPG, *Phantasmaburbia* has you taking control of four characters

in a party, battling foes in turn-based combat. Turns are based on an action gauge which charges based on each character's speed statistic. As you win battles, you earn experience points that go towards leveling up and improving your stats. Each character can learn up to 14 different special skills (used at the expense of spirit power), but the twist is that you can only have four "equipped" at any given time. You have to pick and choose what skills you want each character to use, based on what suits your playstyle, what skills might be necessary up ahead, and what skills you want your entire party to have.

The special skills consist of basic offensive attacks, healing spells, buffs, and debuffs, but each character also gets a unique super-attack to execute with their ghost buddy. You can combine these attacks and have up to all four attack at once for even stronger effects. These attacks feature a unique mini-game that determines how much damage it does. For the kid who uses a pistol, you have to grab energy orbs as they slowly slide across the screen and drag them into the gun to charge it; for the girl who uses kitchen cutlery, you have to cut orbs as they pop onto the screen; for the kid who uses a katana, you have to shake

the hilt as fast as possible; and for the girl who uses a baseball bat, you have to keep the cursor inside an orb as it moves around the screen.

Likewise, certain enemies deliver attacks with mini-games that allow you to reduce the damage of the attack or even completely dodge it. One enemy hovers in the air and tries to smash your party members with a downward thrust, and you get a chance to click and drag each party member out of the way. Another enemy shoots vines at you, and you have to click and hold the cursor on the tip of each vine as it moves across the screen before it reaches you. Sometimes you get to click on projectiles to detonate or deflect them in mid-air. All of these combat mini-games are ultimately pretty mundane, but they do a nice job of spicing things up and giving you something more active to do during combat, instead of just clicking things in a menu.

Boss battles feature a couple of unique mechanics as well. Instead of just being just a stronger version of a straightforward fight, the bosses have some kind of distinct behavior pattern that you have to figure out how to take advantage of. In one fight, the boss forms four mirror images of

itself, with only the real boss taking actual damage. The mirror images change positions constantly, so you have to keep track of the real one -- if you miss and hit the wrong one, it damages your party member. In another fight, the boss will replicate whatever move you use on him if his turn is ready, so you have to time your attacks and use weak attacks when he'll use them back on you, and save your big attacks for when he's charging his attack meter.

The combat has a couple of small issues, however. The main problem I have with it is that most of the game is just too easy. Save points are placed pretty frequently across the map, and they completely replenish your health and spirit power (basically, magic points), so you can easily abuse those things so that you're basically never in any danger of dying. It might have been nice if save points in dungeons didn't completely recuperate your party, and if the game had a slightly more elaborate system for maintaining your party status. Besides that, there were times when I really wanted a pause button in combat, so that I could look for inventory items and switch selected characters more easily.

I also ran into a fair amount of crashes and glitches that managed to disrupt the experience. During one boss fight, the game failed on

me for two different reasons -- once during a crash-to-desktop saying it failed to draw some sprite, and once when one of my party members randomly went off-screen during his attack, and stayed off-screen while nothing else happened. At one point I was possessing a rabbit, but got stuck and unable to move, unable even to exit the possession. Another time the game just froze up with the music and sound effects stuck in a loud, obnoxious stutter.

So *Phantasmaburbia* has a few superficial flaws, but its core essence is definitely worth experiencing. The gameplay and story are both really engaging, thanks to a couple of unique mechanical and narrative twists in the typical formula, and the atmosphere (courtesy of the visual effects and the charming soundtrack) helps draw you into the experience. I enjoyed it so much I bought copies for a couple of friends, and plan to look into some of the creator's other games. ●

WELCOME to
OWL CREEK
Community Map

🏠 House
📷 Tunnel
🔲 Save

BRIGHT MOMENTS:
Clever, satisfying puzzles, an engaging story, and some unique twists on the RPG formula.

FUMBLES IN THE DARK:
Somewhat prone to crashing and glitches.

VERDICT:
Phantasmaburbia is one of the most refreshing indie RPGs I've played in a long time.

Vampires!

Vampires! is a (wait for it....) vampire-themed puzzle game by *CBE Software*, the developer behind the recent sci-fi adventure/puzzle game *J.U.L.I.A.* and *Ghost in the Sheet*. *Vampires!* plays loosely like the classic Lemmings game (except with vampires) -- it's almost dawn, and the vampires have to get back to their crypts before the sun comes up. The problem is that they seem to roam through hallways almost aimlessly, so it's up to you to help them avoid traps and make it back to the crypt safely, before sunrise.
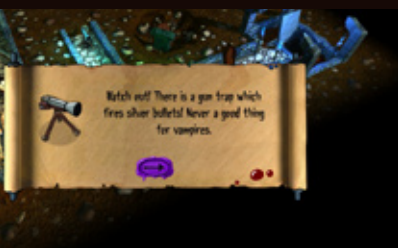
Review by Nick Burgener

The game is played from an overhead perspective with small, self-contained map scenarios. Using the mouse, you click on tiles to alter the environment while the vampires drone ever onward through the hallways and intersections. Your primary interaction is rotating tiles so that you can shape the path you want the vampires to take, even rotating a tile while a vampire is currently in the tile. At first, all you have to worry about is patches of sunlight, which kill the vampires instantly if they walk into it, but things quickly become more complicated.

In later levels, you encounter other hazards that can threaten the life of your vampires. Certain levels have guns aimed down hallways, firing slow-moving bullets at regular intervals, so you have to time your vampires' movements to avoid being hit by the bullets. Similarly, some levels have rotating mirrors that reflect a beam of light down a hallway at regular intervals, as well as wooden spike wheels that roll through the hallways. In order to navigate these traps, you have a couple of tools at your disposal; spider webs that slow down your vampire's movement speed, garlic that blocks a path and causes a vampire to turn the other way, and vampire queens who can take out traps if navigated to them.

Besides all of that, you have different types of vampires to manage as well. When blue vampires come to an intersection, they only make right

turns; red vampires only make left turns; and black vampires will pick a direction randomly. These same rules apply to queen vampires. There are 65 different levels in the game, with more traps and tools being layered on top of each other as you progress through the game. Things start out simply with you only having to navigate a single vampire down a simple corridor with minimal traps, but eventually you're trying to micromanage three or more vampires on opposite sides of a large map with multiple hazards.

So there are ton of levels to play just by themselves, but each level also comes with three different difficulty challenges. Just achieving the minimum requirements is enough to advance to the next stage, but if you're feeling up to a challenge, you can try to get a silver or gold completion rate for beating the level within a certain amount of time and with only a limited number of mouse clicks. Therefore, there's quite a bit of content to experience in *Vampires!* and plenty of replay value, too.

Unfortunately, about a third of the way through the game I kind of lost interest. After a certain point, the levels become almost excessively complex with so many variables happening at once. It was difficult for me to keep track of what was going on at all places on the board at all times, and certain levels ultimately devolved to rote trial-and-

error as I tried to work through possible solutions. Some levels seem incredibly difficult, which can be a very good thing at times, but I reached a point after a while where I was no longer getting satisfaction out of the challenge.

What I really wish is that the game could give you more freedom with your assets and resources. You sometimes get different tools to help navigate your vampires, but they're always restricted to particular levels and might not show up in the next one. Most of the time the challenge lies in finding the solution within your limited confines -- finding the exact, intended solution -- and you don't always get the feeling of creatively coming up with a solution yourself. It would be nice if you had more tools and resources and could use them more freely.

This game will be particularly appealing if you're into puzzle games, or if you're looking for a more casual gaming experience that can be played in shorter bursts. It can be fairly addicting at first, advancing through levels and trying to complete the gold challenges -- I started playing and before I knew it I had completed 20 levels. It's a decent way to pass the time, but not a terribly fulfilling experience unless you're really into puzzle games. ●
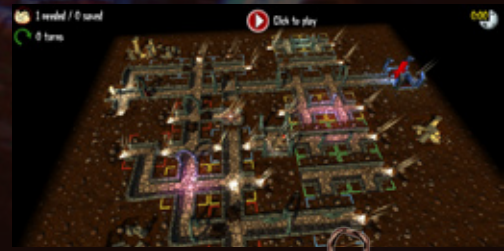
BRIGHT MOMENTS:
Tons of levels, each with a unique puzzle, with lots of optional challenges providing a lot of replay value.

FUMBLES IN THE DARK:
Puzzles feel a little too restrictive; would be nice if you could use more tools more often.

VERDICT:
Vampires! is a decent way to pass the time, and will be particularly enjoyable if you're into puzzle games.

The Witcher 2
Assassins of Kings

Genre: action/adventure/RPG Developer: CDProjekt RED
Publisher: Atari Release date: May 17, 2011
Platforms: Windows, Mac OS X, Xbox 360
Website: http://www.thewitcher.com/

In 2007, *The Witcher* earned a strong reputation among RPG enthusiasts because it felt like a traditional, old-school RPG in a modern era of streamlined, dumbed-down pseudo-RPGs. Its sequel from 2011, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, feels less like a true RPG and more like a mainstream action-RPG, as if it's trying to appeal to the crowd of gamers who turn to *Bethesda* and *BioWare* for their annual RPG fix. That would ordinarily be a pretty damning criticism coming from me, but compared to the likes of *Bethesda* and *BioWare* games, *The Witcher 2* is a mighty fine game that still understands what makes a good, satisfying RPG.

Review by Nick Burgener

The story picks up some time after the conclusion of the first game; after successfully defending King Foltest from a would-be assassin in the final moments of the first game, Geralt finds himself in the employ of the king as his personal guard. *The Witcher 2* begins with a prologue sequence in which Geralt -- imprisoned in a dungeon -- is
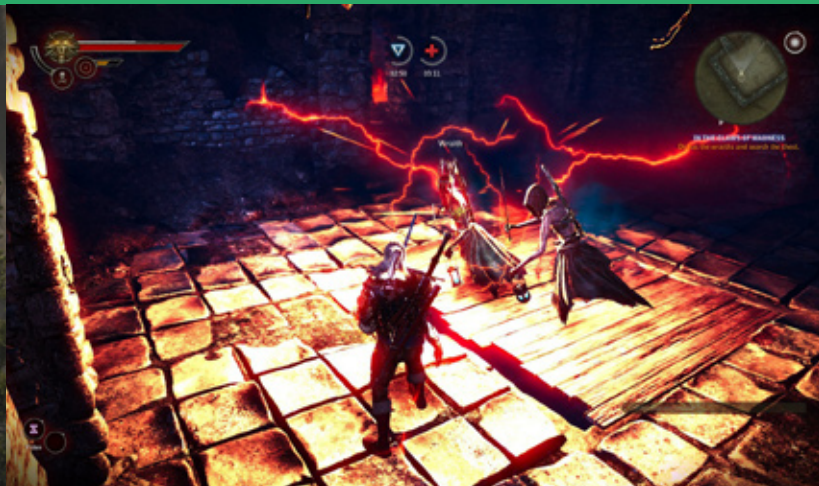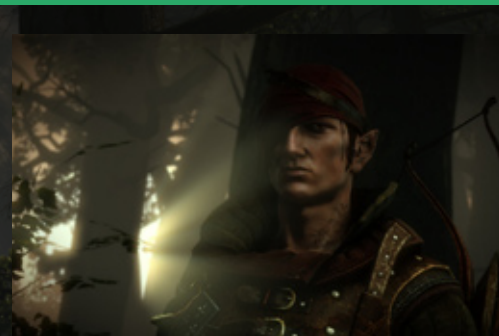
interrogated as the prime suspect in the murder of King Foltest. He recounts the story of events leading to Foltest's murder, revealing that another witcher killed the king and escaped, leaving Geralt alone at the scene of the crime.

Convinced of his innocence, Vernon Roche -- the commander of a special forces unit -- helps Geralt escape from the dungeon so that they can track down the real kingslayer. Along with Triss Merigold (Foltest's royal adviser and Geralt's companion), they head to Flotsam following the trail of the kingslayer. Over the course of the game, the trio become aware of a greater plot to assassinate the other kings of the realm and find themselves in the midst of a political conspiracy where each of their actions might shape the course of war.

The story unfolds primarily through dialogue and cinematic cutscenes. The game seems to pride itself in its dramatic flair, so there are a lot of cutscenes -- it may annoy some people how much game time is spent with your hands off the controls as a passive observer, but it didn't bother me too much because these moments are largely offset by the hands-on gameplay, and by the fact that so much of the game genuinely responds to and is shaped by your input. I'm not a huge fan of excessive cutscenes in games, but the cutscenes in *The Witcher 2* felt appropriate and even necessary for the style of story *CDProjekt* wanted to tell. And the fact of the matter is they look absolutely fantastic and contribute to the game's grand, majestic feel.

As with the first game, the main thing that sets *The Witcher 2* apart from the crowd is how it handles moral decisions and player choice. There are no good or bad decisions and there's no sort of karma scale keeping track of your decisions; it's just you and choice between two shades of grey, with lasting consequences for your actions. The most iconic example of this comes near the end of the first chapter when the main story branches in two different directions depending on whom you choose to follow. Your choice comes down to two characters, and you'll be visiting different hub locations and completing different quests for each of

them, which makes for some good replay value while emphasizing the impact of your choices.

Also in true RPG fashion, nearly every quest is designed to have multiple different outcomes with various solutions. Early in chapter one, for instance, someone asks you to get a recipe from an incense merchant, because he believes one of his products is actually a drug. You talk to the merchant and hear his side of the story, and you have the choice to let him off the hook or to try to get the recipe. If you want the recipe, you can try persuading him, threatening him, using a hex on him, or even just buying the recipe off him. Depending on your dialogue choices you might get the real recipe or a fake recipe (unbeknownst to you).

You return to the quest-giver and you can choose to give him the recipe or not. If you give him the recipe, he'll want you to join him at his secret lab and suggest blindfolding you. You can go along with the blindfolding or convince him to reveal the location of the secret lab so you can meet him and his cohorts there. Once there, you learn of their true intentions; if you

brought them the fake recipe, they attack you, and if you brought them the real recipe, you can choose to take their reward or kill them to stop their own reproduction of the drug. In this quest alone (one of the mundane side-quests) you can already see how many branching decisions there are and how the game gives you the opportunity to role-play your character and determine the outcome of the quest.

Questing is aided by the elaborate journal system which provides detailed descriptions of characters, locations, and quest logs. At every step in a quest, the journal provides about a paragraph's worth of text to describe the context, which is immensely helpful if you've been away from the game for several days and can't remember what was going on. Compare this to *Skyrim*, for example, which only gives you a one-line entry with zero description for a majority of its quests. The journal in *The Witcher 2* also keeps track of information regarding beasts you've read about, and helps to inform you of the game's lore, so it's a handy tool for processing all the game's rich depth and information.

The game follows a three-act story structure with a prologue and epilogue. Each chapter is meant to tell a major slice of the main story (forging alliances, waging war, resolving the aftermath of war), but they also come with plenty of side-quests to complete at your own discretion. While not an open-world game, The Witcher 2 gives you smaller doses of self-contained sandboxes to play in, with each chapter introducing you to a new region to explore, complete with a hub town/location and surrounding wilderness. Most quests can be done in any order, and except for a few plot-centric areas that remain inaccessible until you gain access to them through the main quest, you're free to go off and explore on a free leash.

This style of gameplay strikes an engaging balance between the fun of an open-world game while still having the compelling narrative thrust of a more linear, story-heavy game. Exploration is fun and rewarding because you can pick up side-quests all over the map, and even though there's a quest marker for tracking quest objectives, the quests encourage you to explore and discover things for yourself. Since the game is structured around a linear plot progression, areas are designed to have specific challenges with specific rewards, so it's to your great benefit to explore everything you can to leave you better prepared for the main questline and the following chapters. Meanwhile, the strong emphasis on the game's story gives you a sense of direction

difficulties -- in most situations, if you just go right into a fight planning to mindlessly hack-n-slash your way through it, you're going to get your butt handed to you. I started out in normal mode (later bumped up to hard) and found combat somewhat challenging but immensely satisfying for the first 20 hours; common enemies didn't pose much of a threat unless they were in large numbers, but periodically the game threw a tough challenge my way that forced me to evaluate my strategy and try something different.

When fighting a group of enemies, your positioning is very important because you take double damage when hit in the back. Likewise, you deal increased damage when attacking enemies in the back. In a typical fight, you have to block and dodge at the right times to avoid damage, move around the field to prevent enemies from surrounding you, and use magical signs and items for crowd control. The five magic signs and various types of traps, bombs, and knives have a variety of uses as well, depending on the situation. So it has the thrilling intensity of an action game while requiring you to think a bit about what you're doing (both in the heat of battle, and in how you allocate your talent points).

The combat makes a few noticeable stumbles, however. The first major issue lies with the targeting system -- when you click to attack, Geralt automatically faces and aims his attack at whatever enemy is in the direction the camera

in everything while providing tight cohesion for the overall experience.

Combat plays like a real-time hack-n-slash game, but without the boring tedium of a typical, straightforward hack-n-slash game. Left-clicking allows you to perform a standard fast attack, and right-clicking allows you to perform a slower strong attack. Holding the E key allows you to block incoming attacks for reduced damage at the expense of stamina, and if you click at the right time during a parry you can counter-attack with a riposte. Pressing the space key while

indicating a direction with the WASD keys causes you to perform a dodge-roll. Pressing Q will cast whatever magic sign you have selected, and pressing R will use whatever secondary weapon (bombs, traps, throwing knives) you have selected.

With just that overview of the controls, you can already tell it's an active system that gives you a lot of precise control over your character while giving you plenty of actions to perform as you find necessary. Combat actually proves rather tactical, especially when playing in the harder

is aimed. This leads to some frustrating moments when there's an enemy two feet away on the right side of the screen, so you press D to move right and attack, but then Geralt turns and targets another enemy 15 feet away in the center of the screen. It's easy enough to adapt to always aiming the camera where you want to attack, but you still run into occasional issues where Geralt turns unpredictably to attack an unintended target (sometimes an enemy completely off-screen), leaving your back exposed for critical damage.

Meanwhile, for some inane reason, they've removed the ability to drink potions mid-battle; you're only able to drink potions while meditating in a non-combat state. It's nice that you can now meditate anywhere you want, instead of having to seek out the nearest fireplace, but it's absolutely stupid that you can't drink potions in combat. The idea is that you're supposed to prepare in advance, but you never know what you're going to encounter up ahead. A lot of combat situations occur suddenly, without warning, or immediately after a cutscene, so you're forced to stumble into a fight and then load a save if it turns out you needed a potion to survive the fight.

As an RPG, the combat values stats and character talents, balancing your character's abilities with your own skills. As you gain experience for killing enemies and completing quests, you level-up, which grants talent points that

you can spend in one of four skill trees including an introductory "training" tree with basic skills, a "swordsmanship" tree for melee combat techniques, a "signs" tree for upgrading magic spells, and an "alchemy" tree for preparing potions, bombs, blade oils, and stat-altering mutagens. You can spend up to 30 talent points in each of the main three trees, and with a hard level cap of 35, it means you'll only be able to specialize in one field and dabble in a second field.

Deciding how to build your character is one of the most satisfying aspects of *The Witcher 2* because there are so many great talents to choose from and

only so many talent points to spend. Like any good RPG, it forces you to weigh the benefits of different skills while considering how they contribute to your desired playstyle. It encourages role-playing a specific type of build, which allows for great replay value since you can play an entirely different character and experience a different style of combat (while also making different choices in the main story). The talent system is also great because it allows the combat to evolve dynamically over the course of the game, with new talents unlocking new maneuvers and enabling different playstyles.

If I had to mention a major complaint, I guess it would have to be that the chapters got progressively less interesting as the game went on. I really liked the area in the first chapter because it felt organic and down-to-earth; meanwhile, the main objective of "find the kingslayer" was still fresh and had a strong impetus. In the second chapter I went to a dwarven city, and for some reason I always find dwarven architecture drab and uninteresting. The second chapter is where the most action is, but that's also when the quests start turning into politics. Once I was in the third and final chapter, the plot was basically all relatively mundane politics set in a crummy area consisting of a cluttered, confusing ruined city and underground sewers, and the momentum of the main quest had sort of petered out.

I got about 50 hours out of *The Witcher 2*, and even though the second half wasn't quite as interesting as the first half, it was an enjoyable experience all the way through. And even though it feels like less of an RPG compared to the original game, it's still a far more satisfying RPG than anything *Bethesda* or *BioWare* has put out lately. Here's hoping *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* turns out alright. ●

BRIGHT MOMENTS:
Great quest design that values player input, a truly branching main story, and incredible aesthetics.

FUMBLES IN THE DARK:
Second half not as interesting as the first half, inability to drink potions during combat, and awkward targeting during combat.

VERDICT:
The Witcher 2 is a solid mixture of action and RPG elements tied together with a good story and great atmosphere.

★★★★☆