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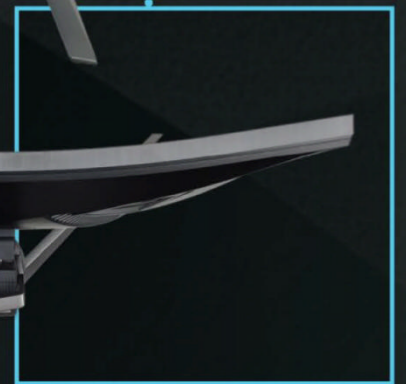
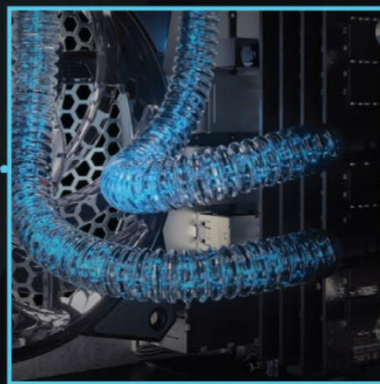


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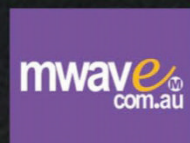
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Sure, war is all hell, as my old pal Billy T. Sherman once said. But it does make for a lot of drama and action, and so war is often the backdrop to some of the most affecting stories we tell about ourselves – and that's as true for games as any other creative medium. In this special issue we look at games past, present, and future. We look at shooters and grand strategies. And we try to have some fun, while also paying respect to the real warfighters.

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preview

Mixing survival and tactical shooting ideas, *Breakpoint* could be PS4's most realistic shooter yet.



“
**THE RAMBO
 FANTASY’S BEEN
 REPLACED WITH PURE
 SURVIVAL**”

FORMAT PS4 RELEASE DATE 4 Oct
 PUBLISHER UBISOFT DEVELOPER UBISOFT PARIS

GHOST RECON: BREAKPOINT

A fresh focus on survival raises the stakes in this tactical shooter.

UNLIKE GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS, WHICH SAW YOU SINGLE-HANDEDLY TAKE DOWN A BOLIVIAN DRUG CARTEL, THIS NEW ENTRY IN THE CLANCY-VERSE TACTICAL SHOOTER SERIES PUTS THE BULLSEYE ON YOUR BACK. YOU’RE NO LONGER THE HUNTER, BUT THE HUNTED; THE RAMBO FANTASY’S BEEN REPLACED WITH PURE SURVIVAL.

The latter factor comes in a variety of progress-hindering flavours, as Breakpoint’s fictional archipelago – dubbed Auroa – has been crafted to keep you on edge. Sun-baked beaches, snow-capped mountains, and dense jungles are just a few of the environments you’ll have to endure. And that doesn’t account for the unpredictable weather that can make each area a nightmare to navigate.

You needn’t wait for sunburn or frostbite to get the best of you, though, because you also face the threats of fatigue, hunger, dehydration, and persistent injury. During our brief demo developer Ubisoft Paris offers some examples: a lack of water will deplete your stamina, not eating properly will make it more difficult to steady your aim, and a bullet wound can’t be fixed with a sticky plaster.

With all this at play, just navigating the island is fraught with danger; carelessly running and falling down a steep slope could leave you with a hurt leg and unable to run. Unsurprisingly, being shot will do even more damage; fail to remove a slug from your arm, for example, and you won’t be able to shoulder a two-handed weapon.





LEFT Breakpoint plays on the stealth side of the Ghost Recon series. Even if a team member is seen you will remain undetected.



RIGHT You need to find camps scattered around the map. These act as hubs where you can craft gear, select loadouts, and heal injuries.



||
**BREAKPOINT'S
ANTAGONISTS ARE
A ROGUE GROUP OF
EX-GHOSTS, CALLED
THE WOLVES.**

In addition to human soldiers pursuing your Ghost, a buzzing drone army is constantly hunting you down.

KEEPING IT REAL

Breakpoint is introducing new levels of realism



1 Injuries will affect what you can do: hurt your leg and you can't run; damage your shoulder and your aim will be off. Taking time to fix injuries is essential.



2 You can make your own entry points in Breakpoint by using the torch cutter to create gaps in fences. We can't wait to see what other freedoms the game will offer.



3 Even though you're trapped on an island the Ghosts have access to a variety of vehicles, and the handling has been improved for this soft-sequel to Wildlands.



4 Each class has its own weapons to master, and in Breakpoint you'll need to keep these guns clean. If you don't, their aim and power will be affected.



ABOVE The Punisher himself, actor Jon Bernthal, is the cause of all your problems in *Ghost Recon: Breakpoint*. He does drone on a bit.



ABOVE *Breakpoint* looks like it'll be a brutal game. The new CQC animation looks violently realistic.



ABOVE Just like *Wildlands* this is an open world sandbox to explore, with a variety of biomes to challenge you.



ATTACK OF THE DRONES

Regardless of what challenges you face in staying alive in these wildlands, there's no escaping the game's terrifying enemy faction. A rogue group of ex-Ghosts called the Wolves, *Breakpoint*'s antagonists are led by Cole D Walker, a morally ambiguous character first introduced in *Wildlands*' Operational Oracle expansion. While Walker was more of a good guy in the story-driven DLC, he's fully embraced the dark side by *Breakpoint*'s start. Played by actor Jon Bernthal, the big bad has taken over Skell Technologies, a Silicon-Valley-like corporation that makes drones and other military hardware. Walker and his crew have not only reprogrammed the company's bots to do their bidding, but are also forcing Skell's engineers to evolve the tech for even more nefarious deeds.

FACTRICK

1. GET HARD

The difficulty level you play at will determine the severity of the core survival mechanics.

2. LARA MUD

You can blend into the environment by going prone and caking yourself in mud, like Lara Croft.

3. MAN ON

Player-versus-player will be available at launch and will feature customisation unlockables.

Our demo sees the Ghosts rescuing one of these employees from the company's island headquarters. The action features plenty of familiar stealth and precision gunplay, as the Ghosts carefully coordinate to infiltrate the campus and extract the prisoner. Things get heated, however, when an evildoer named Flycatcher crashes the party. Looking more like a James Bond villain than a typical Ghost Recon terrorist, the cloaked character unleashes a trio of drones on the fleeing Ghosts. Witnessing the locust-like robots crashing through a window, before hunting the heroes down with Terminator-like determination, is the demo's most frightening highlight.

BABY'S GOT BIVOUCAC

Breakpoint's menacing enemy faction, creepy autonomous bots, and scary-real survival elements more than stack the odds against you, but it's not all doom and gloom. Thanks to bivouacs - makeshift camps spread all over Auroa - there's some hope for the beleaguered Ghosts. Arguably the game's most significant new feature, these settlements afford you a place to regroup and rest. Upon unlocking a bivouac you can treat your ailments, craft gear from found resources, maintain and upgrade your weapons, and study intel to plan for the next mission.

These safe havens also give you the opportunity to pick a class appropriate for the objectives ahead. Each of the four disciplines (Assault, Sharpshooter, Panther, and Engineer) has access to specific perks, weapons, and gear, encouraging you to put together a well-rounded co-op crew. You're never locked into a class either, as you can swap to a different one every time you visit a bivouac. The system is aiming to essentially give you the chance to build the perfect Ghost (or team of Ghosts) before tackling each and every mission.

Breakpoint seems to be striking a promising balance, upping the realism and authenticity of playing as a Ghost while simultaneously leaning further than ever into the Clancy-verse's fictional side for its story and setting. At its heart *Breakpoint* is still an Ubisoft open world shooter, with all the map-blinking objectives you'd expect, but its complexity suggests there could be a lot to explore in here for team and solo players alike. ■

HOW WELL DID METAL GEAR SOLID PREDICT THE FUTURE OF WARFARE?

Gazing into the future... **Addie Burke**

THE METAL GEAR SOLID FRANCHISE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A LITTLE... WEIRD. FROM CYBERNETIC NINJAS TO AUTOMATED CAMOUFLAGE TO IMMENSE WALKING TANKS, FRANCHISE DIRECTOR HIDEO KOJIMA HAS NEVER SHIED AWAY FROM THE BIZARRE. BUT THE MOST INTERESTING BIT OF KOJIMAS STRANGENESS IS THE DYSTOPIAN FUTURE HIS SERIES DEPICTS.

Each entry in the Metal Gear Solid franchise (well, except for MGS3) makes a series of bold predictions of the state of the world in the early years of the 21st century. But as we dive towards 202, we find ourselves living in a world sort of similar to the one in Kojima's game. At this point, we've met that future in the real world. How does Kojima's predictions stack up?

GENETIC MANIPULATION OF SOLDIERS WILL BE ADVANCED ENOUGH TO SEE WIDESPREAD USE

The prediction: The generic guards

you encounter in Metal Gear Solid are genetically modified to encourage alertness and aggression. As if that isn't enough, the main character and his principal antagonist are both clones of the mythical Big Boss. Clearly, Kojima predicted a society that had a handle on genetic engineering and cloning.

The reality: Given a bit of wiggle room, I say Kojima got this one right. Genetic engineering and gene therapy are more commonly used in medicine than war, but the technology is essentially the same. There hasn't been anything resembling the extensive human cloning depicted in MGS, but the main obstacles are ethical, not technological. We probably could engineer human clones – we simply choose not to do so.

TERRORIST ATTACKS CAUSE WIDESPREAD DESTRUCTION IN NEW YORK CITY

The prediction: Metal Gear Solid 2 is perhaps the most prescient of Kojima's games – it's chock full of predictions

that almost came true. Consider this: the central location in MGS2, a cleanup facility near New York, was built in reaction to a massive terrorist attack on the city. Oh boy.

The reality: Scarily accurate, actually. It would be easy to say that MGS2 was made in reaction to September 11, 2001, but MGS2 was all but finished by then – it was released only 62 days later (game development takes more time than that). The nature of the attack – a crashing vehicle ruining lower Manhattan – was so similar to the actual tragedy that nearly all imagery of the event was expunged from the game.

THE GOVERNMENT WILL SECRETLY MONITOR AND CENSOR GLOBAL WEB TRAFFIC

The prediction: The central storyline for Metal Gear Solid 2 involves a powerful artificial intelligence designed for the sole purpose of monitoring and surveillance. Specifically, this AI monitors and censors web traffic in an effort to control and



LEFT Genetic modifications on guards? Not so much.

RIGHT Private militaries? Yeah, kinda?



LEFT Modern drones may not be on the MGS scale, but still... this one was spot on.



protect the civilian population. Sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it?

The reality: Kojima pretty much nailed this one. Granted, the Patriots were more concerned with filtering out useless information, while the NSAs domestic program is essentially an extension of police wiretapping. But Kojima correctly predicted that the powers-that-be would have a big hand in monitoring the flow of information on the web. Given that MGS2 was in development long before the PATRIOT Act was written, it was a pretty solid guess.

UNMANNED WAR MACHINES WILL TAKE PROMINENT ROLES ON BATTLEFIELDS IN THE FUTURE

The prediction: The Metal Gear Solid franchise offers a fascinating look into the evolution of unmanned, automated warfare. The only unmanned enemies you face in Metal Gear Solid are stationary, gun-equipped cameras. MGS2 takes it a step further with cyphers, essentially autonomous flying camera drones. Metal Gear Solid 4 takes it several steps further, introducing powerful, autonomous walking tanks called GEKKO.

The reality: Kojima got this one right, if only in theory. Drones and unmanned weapons platforms have taken an ever-growing place on modern battlefields. The difference is in the details, though - actual unmanned drones are usually closer to planes rather than tanks, and are usually piloted via remote control.

NANOMACHINES WILL BE HIGHLY ADVANCED AND COMMONPLACE IN THE MILITARY WORLD

The prediction: Nanomachines, son! They're everywhere throughout the Metal Gear Solid franchise. Some nanomachines give characters accelerated healing. Others serve as communication relays, allowing squadmates to literally share their senses. Nanomachines suppress soldiers' emotions, making them more efficient on the battlefield and less likely to commit atrocities. There's no problem those tiny wonders can't fix.

The reality: Kojima was way off base, at least as far as 2014 goes. Nanomachines do exist, but they're nowhere near as Kojima's work predicted. Real-world nanomachines are capable of small feats like shuttling individual ions across otherwise impassable boundaries, which stands in sharp contrast to the nearly magical powers nanomachines are given in the Metal Gear Solid franchise. When you get down to it, nanomachines are basically Kojima's equivalent to a wizard did it.

PRIVATE MILITARIES OVERTAKE NATIONAL ARMIES AS THE PREMIER FIGHTING FORCES ON EARTH

The prediction: The issue is first hinted at in MGS2 - the patrolling guards are all members of an ex-russian PMC, the Gurlukovich Mercenaries - but the concept fully ripens in Metal Gear Solid 4. In MGS4's version of the 21st century, the roles of state militaries have essentially

been turned over to PMCs so powerful that a constant series of proxy wars are needed to keep the war economy moving.

The reality: Sorry, but this one isn't even close. The significant armed forces of the world are still funded and controlled by various nation-states. Perhaps this isn't a bad thing - with the public military, war is used as a means to securing economic ends, rather than as an end in itself as depicted in MGS4. To give credit where it's due, PMC usage is on the rise, but they're nowhere near close to achieving the supremacy Kojima depicted.

A SMALL GROUP OF POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL ELITES SHAPE WORLD EVENTS TO SUIT THEIR NEEDS

The prediction: The single most important organisation in the entire Metal Gear Solid franchise is the shadowy group known as The Patriots. Consisting of anonymous wealthy donors, and headed by the Wisemans Committee, the Patriots embody the idea of a New World Order conspiracy, in which a select cabal directs the motions of history through a series of fences and puppets.

The reality: Ultimately, this is where Kojima really [REDACTED]. The idea that any one group [REDACTED] to any single future goal is patently [REDACTED]. There are simply [REDACTED] for any one group to possibly satisfy. Of course, [REDACTED].



REVISITING **BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2**

Going back to a time when Battlefield wasn't afraid to tell a few jokes...

Andy Kelly

There was a moment, believe it or not, when this FPS behemoth didn't take itself quite so seriously. Where Battlefield 1's single-player campaign is mixture of harrowing battle scenes and spirited gallows humor (a vast improvement on BF4's angry-men-shouting-at-each-other approach), the Bad Company games are the complete opposite, following a squad of misfits caught up in a war between Russia and America. They're written off by the US Army's top brass as irresponsible cannon fodder, but prove themselves to be surprisingly capable on the battlefield despite their, er, colourful personalities.



PRESTON MARLOWE IS A COCKY, MISCHIEVOUS SNIPER WHO ENDED UP IN BAD COMPANY AFTER CRASHING A HELICOPTER INTO A GENERAL'S LIMOUSINE. TERRANCE 'SWEETS' SWEETWATER IS A TWITCHY TECHNICIAN WHO ACCIDENTALLY UPLOADED A VIRUS TO A MILITARY COMPUTER. GEORGE 'HAGS' HAGGARD IS A PYROMANIAC REDNECK WHO BLEW UP AN AMMO DEPOT. AND SAMUEL 'SARGE' REDFORD IS THE LEADER, WHO ONLY JOINED BAD COMPANY BECAUSE HE WAS PROMISED AN EARLY DISCHARGE FROM THE ARMY IF HE DID SO. IT'S A MOTLEY, RAGTAG BUNCH, AND THEIR INABILITY TO BEHAVE LIKE PROFESSIONAL SOLDIERS IS A FREQUENT SOURCE OF AMUSEMENT.

The original *Bad Company*, released on Xbox 360 in 2008, was the first game to use DICE's proprietary Frostbite engine - which, in fact, EA is still using today, for games as diverse as *Dragon Age* and *Star Wars Battlefront*. A technology called 'tactical destruction' (DICE loves a good buzzword) lets you blast the game's levels apart, blowing chunks out of walls and levelling buildings. There's nothing to match the scale of *Battlefield 4*'s collapsing skyscraper in *Bad Company*, but it was impressive at the time, and was one of the game's biggest selling points. Destructible scenery is a fairly standard thing in today's first-person shooters, but in the gaming sphere of eight years ago, just the promise of it was enough to ignite people's appetites.

In multiplayer, a reliably strategic, and dramatic, use of this tech is setting the charge at a control point, covering the walls in C4, then hiding outside. The enemy team will inevitably make a dash for the point to disarm the charge, at which point you click your detonator and watch with glee as the entire building collapses on them, earning you a mountain of XP. Several games, notably *Red Faction*, featured destructible levels, but *Bad Company* was one of the first to have meaningful tactical applications.

There was also something irresistible



||
**THE HUMOUR
COULD HAVE BEEN
OBNOXIOUS, BUT THE
WRITERS MANAGE
TO KEEP IT ON THE
RIGHT SIDE OF
ENDEARING.**

about destroying a building in multiplayer and knowing that other players on the map could witness your handiwork. When the game was announced, DICE made its tongue-in-cheek approach clear by parodying various games in their trailers. In one, which pokes fun at Gears of War, Haggard runs through a ruined city as a haunting voice sings Mad World by Gary Jules. Then he stops and spins around to find Sweetwater singing the song, and starts yelling at him to shut up. It's a perfect example of the series' light-hearted tone. The humour could have easily been obnoxious, but the writers manage to keep the characters and dialogue on the right side of endearing.

BORN TO BE BAD

In the first game, Bad Company goes up against a ruthless mercenary army allied with the Russians called Legionnaire. The squad learns that their mercenaries are paid in gold bars, and finding this treasure becomes their main objective, even though they're supposed to be fighting for the Americans, not themselves. The game ends with them driving into the sunset in a truck loaded with bullion, but between this point and the beginning of Bad Company 2 they're captured and returned to the front line. Now, however, thanks to their exploits in the first game, they've been given a special assignment to recover a dangerous EMP weapon from the Russians. The US Army still considers them a liability, but has begrudgingly acknowledged their skill in battle.

Before we rejoin the gang, the game takes us back to the autumn of 1944, to an island in the Sea of Japan. A small team of US commandos has been sent there to extract a Japanese scientist holding information that could turn the tide of





the war, and you play as one of them. The opening is brilliantly atmospheric, with the squad moving along a foggy, moonlit river in a dinghy, deep behind enemy lines. As they sneak through enemy camps and try to locate the target, the sun slowly rises until the jungle is bathed in golden light. It's aged quite a bit, but still looks very handsome in places.

As you play, you occasionally hear a loud, machine-like groaning in the distance. This is later revealed to be the Aurora, an experimental EMP bomb that, at the end of the mission, you see being detonated in spectacular fashion. The operation is covered up by the US military and soon becomes a myth. Then we leap through time and join Bad Company in the present day. It's a fantastic introduction, and one of the Battlefield series' best, most evocative singleplayer sequences. It's also a lot more serious than anything in the first game, which sets the tone for the rest of the story. The humour is still present, but the characters aren't as self-centred as before.

DICE realised that, in the original, there was a disconnect between everyman Marlowe and the fact that, when you played the game, you become an unstoppable one-man army. "You were this ordinary guy, but when you were playing you were Action Jackson," said producer Gordon Van Dyke in a 2010 interview. "So we wanted to fuse that together. We kept the same characters and the same voice actors, and didn't lose our sense of humour, but made their goals more serious and had them fight for everyone, not just themselves." The result is a leader and squad that are a lot more likeable, and who have a much more noble cause.

Russian colonel Arkady Kirilenko, the villain of the piece, is planning to trigger the EMP and disable America's power grid, paving the way for an invasion. And, naturally, it's your job to stop him. This does make it easier to root for the characters, and gives them a clearer goal, but it's a fairly generic story compared to its predecessor. The heroes of a military FPS campaign chasing gold rather than glory was a unique spin on the formula, and one that DICE should consider returning to if it makes another Bad Company.

There are no plans for a sequel at the moment, though, despite the second game selling a tidy six million copies. "We're not sure what people really liked about it," said former DICE CEO Karl-Magnus Troedsson in a 2014 interview. "Some people say they found the multiplayer faster and more direct. Some liked the characters and the humour. People liked different things about it, and it's scary to go back and try and remake a fan favourite when no one can really put their finger on what exactly it is people loved about it."

The singleplayer campaign, though about as linear as it gets, makes ample use of large, open spaces, including ruined cities, mountain bases and vast, forested

valleys. Like the multiplayer that made the series famous, it mixes air, vehicle and infantry combat to great effect, and though there are slightly too many on-rail sections, there's a good amount of variety. Despite the squad's best efforts, however, the Russians manage to invade the US and advance through Canada and Alaska. The game ends on that rather bleak note, and creates a clear setup for a sequel, which (if it ever gets made) could see Bad Company defending their home turf, in Homefront-style.

BETTER WITH FRIENDS

As fun as the singleplayer campaign is, it's the class-based multiplayer that kept people playing Bad Company 2 for hundreds of hours. The fast pace, destructible levels, enormous maps, broad selection of vehicles and compelling progression system are among the many reasons people still consider it their favourite of the series. Later games have expanded massively in terms of scope and scale, but there's something appealing about the more focused, and less flashy design of Bad Company 2's multiplayer. Skyscrapers falling over and tropical storms are cool, but this is proof you can have an amazing multiplayer experience without being so over the top.

The maps are some of the most memorable in the series, too. Teaming up with friends and driving a column of tanks along the waterfront in Arica Harbour while snipers hang back and pick off Engineers is a thrill. And the dense, snow-covered forests and scattered villages of White Pass make for some tense, brutal firefights. Ten maps shipped with Bad Company 2, and they each have their own distinctive personality and ambience. They're smaller than the series' other sprawling battlefields, but this worked in the game's favour, making every round feel tight and fast-paced. If you make a mistake and get yourself killed, you can respawn and dash back into the thick of a battle in no time, which gives the game a great energy.

Some hardcore fans consider Bad Company 2 to be too streamlined compared to the scope and depth of its massive, and dense later brethren in the series. But this is precisely why it works. It's a polished, tightly designed and brilliantly refined take on the Battlefield formula. And the addition of upgrade trees for each of the four classes encourages you to step out of your comfort zone and try different styles of play.

All of these elements, combined with the charismatic characters and humorous tone of the singleplayer campaign, make Bad Company 2 one of the most beloved games in the series. If DICE is still sitting around and wondering why people love these games, and if it should make another one, the choice is obvious. The fact that people are still talking, writing and reminiscing about this game almost seven years after its release should be evidence enough that a sequel is more than welcome.

HOW TO BE **A VIDEO GAME GUARD:** A PROFESSIONAL GUIDE

It's not incompetence. It's just very special training.

David Houghton

So you want to join the esteemed ranks of video game guards, do you? Be warned, it's a tough life. The hours are long, the work is repetitive, and constant vigilance is a must. And then there's the bad PR to consider.

Forever being throttled, stabbed, shot and blown up, and usually without the slightest warning bar a slight shuffling noise in the shadows behind them, people tend to assume that our noble troops are a bit stupid. They're not. They're just trained in a very particular way. And if you want to join them, you'll have to get with that program sharpish. Read on, and we'll take you through the official training manual.

KEEP YOUR BACK TO ANY OPEN DOORWAY

You definitely don't want to be looking towards the entrance to the room you're guarding. Why? Because anything and anyone worth protecting will be in the middle of it of course! That's where any would-be thief or assassin will be heading, so that's where you want to look. That inbound doorway or tunnel entrance? Nothing to see there. Turn your back to it and pay it no heed. What's the worst that could happen?

KNOW YOUR PATROL ROUTE AND NEVER DEVIATE FROM IT

Routine is the backbone of vigilance. If you're going to guard a room, cave, courtyard or repurposed Alaskan military base, you'll need to stick to the plan. Patrol routes are there for a reason. You absolutely must follow the precise line and patrol timing designated to you, and you absolutely must synchronise your movements with those of your colleagues on every single circuit. What's that, you say? Every three loops you end up leaving a brief gap right down the middle of the room, before ending up all alone in a dark corner? Nonsense. We've had out best military strategists working

on this for months with a sheet of graph paper and a stop watch. Don't think. Obey.

DEFINITELY HANG AROUND NEAR SHADOWS

It shouldn't surprise you to find that we have a vast array of dark, gloomy corners in the facility. After all, if everywhere was well-lit, we wouldn't need security guards in the first place, would we? And God knows it's cheaper to pay you guys than to buy a new bulb. So definitely, definitely hang out near any large expanses of shadow you find. Much like those doorways though, try to keep your back to any obvious patches of darkness. As we all know, there's nothing to see in the dark, so you'd be wasting your time looking into it. And what would be the point of that?

USE ANY POTENTIAL EXPLOSIVES AS GROUP MEETING POINTS

If you absolutely must stop patrolling and stand still, please, please do so near any large explosive object that may be in the room. That stuff is dangerous, so it needs as many people looking after it as possible, as closely as possible. Fireworks, fuel barrels, cars... Anything that might blow up is something you should be right on top of, ideally with a small group of colleagues. Oh, and if you could make sure that you're all looking in the same direction as you do this, that would be great. If any threat does present itself, we want as many eyes on it and ready to react as possible.

How do we know that you'll be looking in the right direction? Easy. Check if you can see the entrance to the room you're in. If you can't, you're looking the right way.

CLIFFTOPS, WATER AND HIGH WINDOWS ARE YOUR FRIENDS

Guarding is a stressful business. We get that. And because we need your minds sharp, we want to help you to maintain a healthy, well-adjusted, efficient mental state. So you should occasionally take

some time out to relax and take in the bigger picture. Maybe pause to appreciate nature and the awesome beauty all around you. We find that staring at water really helps. It's best if you stand very close to the edge for maximum effect. We also recommend the awe-inspiring vistas provided by cliff edges and high windows. Make sure that the latter are wide open first though, for total clarity of viewing experience.

IT WAS PROBABLY JUST THE WIND

Seriously. Just the wind. The wind can sound like anything, you know. Breath, footsteps, the creaking of a door, small arms fire, explosions, the driving of a heavily armed motor vehicle. The breeze is more than capable of sounding like all of these things and more. Don't worry. Even if you think you can actively see an unauthorised intruder with a gun right in front of you, the chances are that that's the just the wind as well. A wind mirage. The wind can do those. But if you're sure there really is something untoward going on...

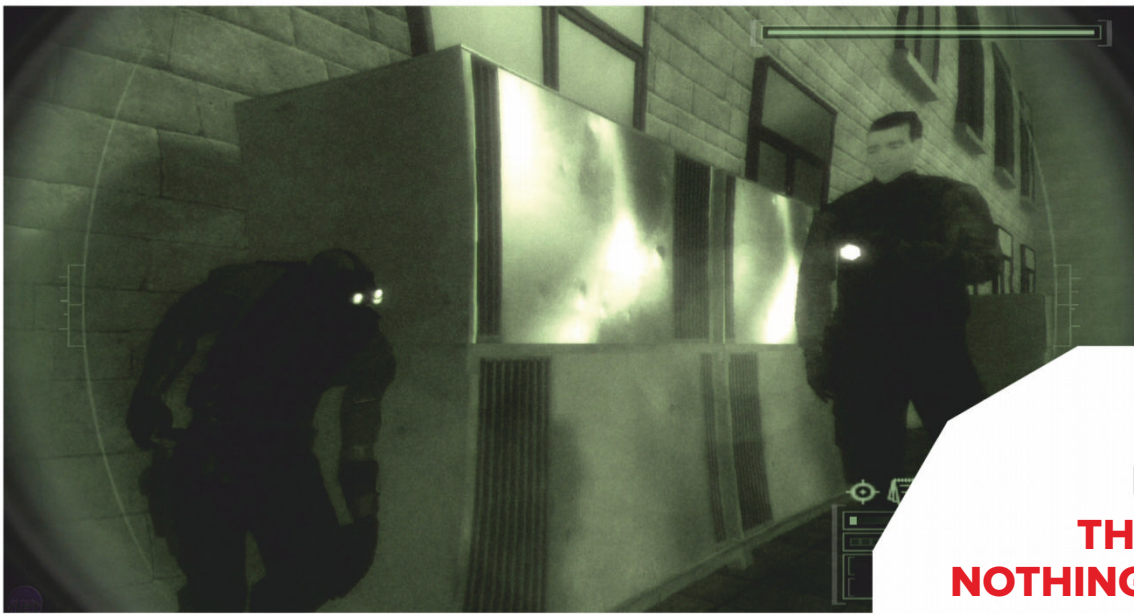
IF YOU SERIOUSLY SUSPECT A DISTURBANCE, IGNORE IT.

IT WILL GO AWAY

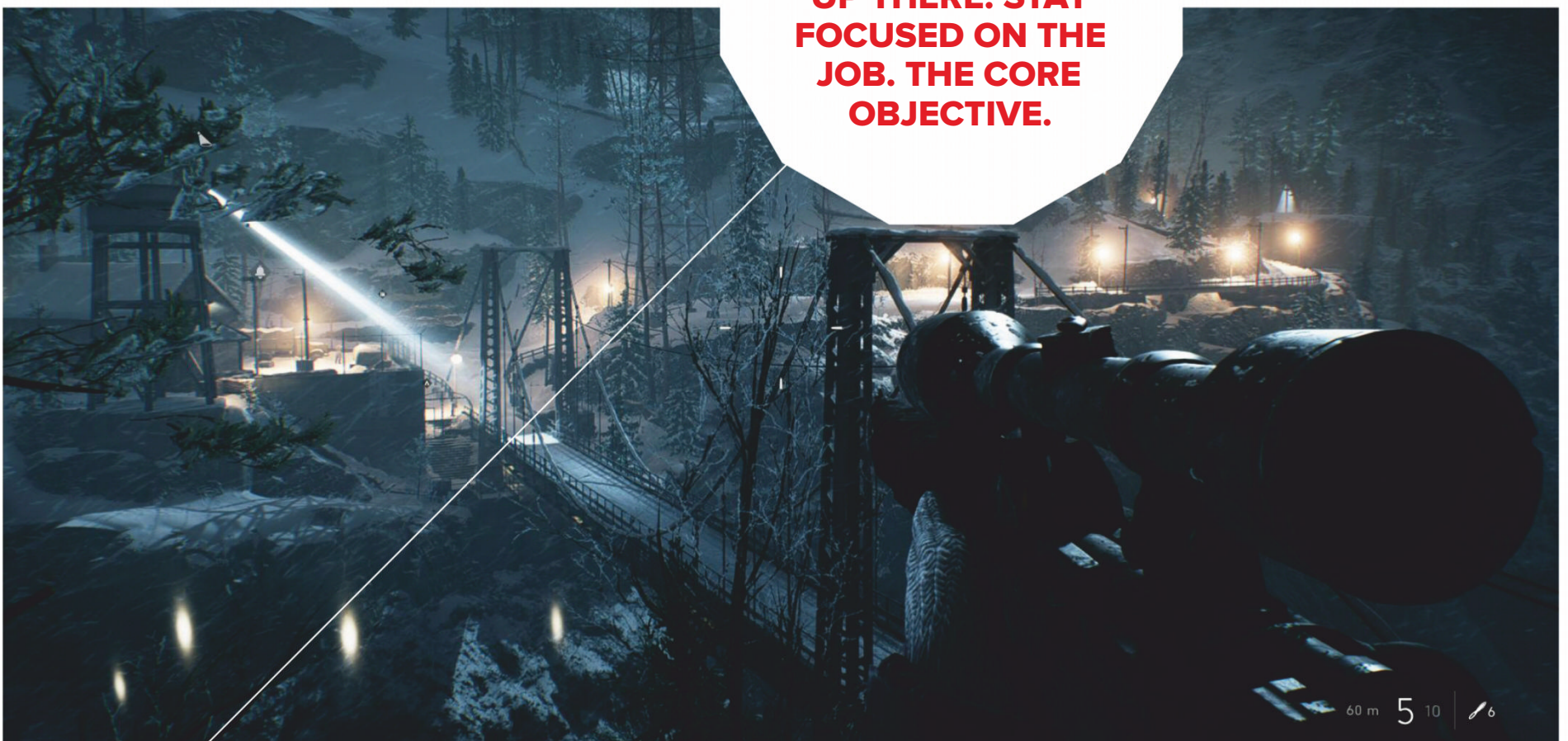
On the rare occasions that a perceived threat isn't just a blustery figment of your fetid, over-active imagination, there's a simple course of action to follow. Ignore it. Oh of course, by all means have a brief, cursory look if doing so will set your mind at rest. But give it 30 seconds to a minute at most, then go straight back to your previous business. If we show fear, then the terrorists have already won. If, however, we show them that we're just not really that bothered about their assault on our property and people, then the opposition will become intimidated by our nonchalance and will probably just leave.

IF ATTACKED, DON'T CAUSE A FUSS

Okay, absolute worst case scenario. There



THERE'S NOTHING FOR YOU UP THERE. STAY FOCUSED ON THE JOB. THE CORE OBJECTIVE.



really is a threat, it isn't made of wind, it doesn't leave when you ignore it and as a result, you find yourself in the (very rare) state of being choked into the inky black velvet embrace of unconsciousness. There's an easy solution to that one too. Just go with it. Don't fight back, don't cause a fuss, don't make any noise, don't go for your weapon and absolutely don't make any serious effort to alert any of your colleagues to your predicament.

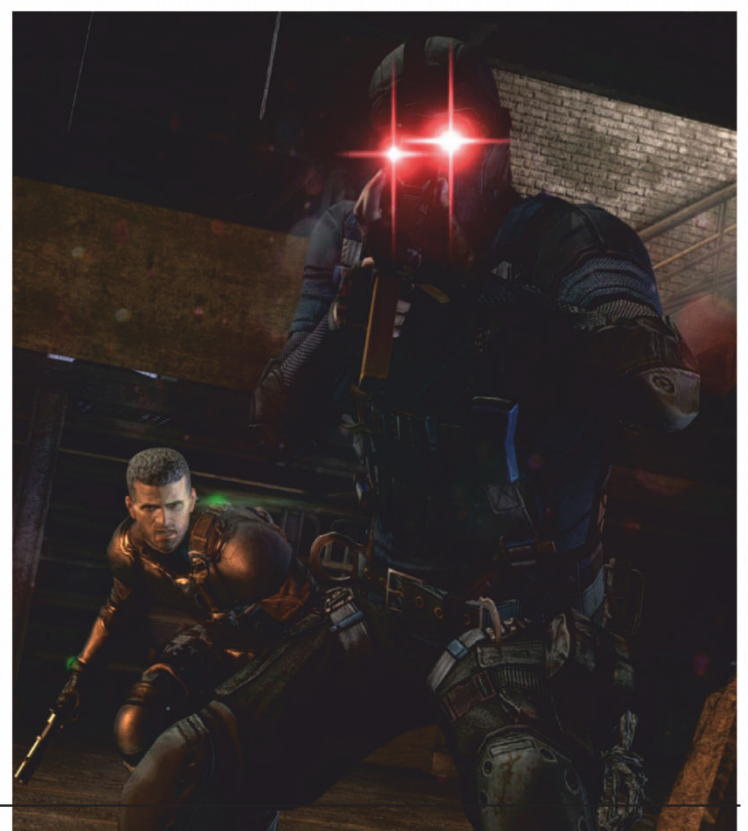
You see with any luck, the effort of all that choking will see our adversary become too tired to effectively function afterwards. Thus, the next chap he comes across will find him far easier to overpower than you did. Even if not, the one after him probably will. Attritionally, over the course of many chokings, we will wear this interloper down. It's a subtle,

devious tactic, and he won't see our trap closing until it's far too late. Though if our opponent is going lethal erm... well, sorry about that.

DON'T LOOK UP

There's nothing for you up there. Stay focused on the job. The core objective. The room, down here, that you're guarding. On the ground. If it's more than three feet above your head-height, its outside of your remit, and therefore really not worth your attention. If you're having particular trouble with elevated distractions, we have some specially formulated vertical blinker contact lenses you can collect from the supplies office.

Guarding the ceiling... Honestly, you guys. What do you think this job is? Pigeon security?



THE


25

~~BEST WAR MOVIES
FROM DUNKIRK TO
DOWNFALL (AND
EVERYTHING IN
BETWEEN)~~

Sometimes you want to take a break from playing on the battlefield.

So watch one instead.

Gem Sneddon



War movies are as old as cinema itself. Since people have been able to point a camera at stuff for entertainment, they've chosen to point it at conflict. Amongst other things. And while some depictions of war are pure, fantastical spectacle, designed to wow audiences with big explosions and chunky men wearing ripped camo fatigues, the best war movies tend to be more serious affairs, which deal with the horror and humanity of battle. This list is very much concerned with the more considered takes on war. We've had a handful of genuinely excellent war movies released over the last couple of years. They make this list, for obvious reasons, and they're in good company as every entry here is a great film in its own right. Here are the best war movies ever made.



The Hurt Locker

RELEASE DATE 2008

Before he became the Avengers' archer Jeremy Renner took on the role of a conflicted vet, tasked with leading an explosive ordnance disposal team in Iraq. Not the most tantalising job offer, but that's the pull of Kathryn Bigelow's Oscar-winner. Despite the constant danger, for guys like Sergeant First Class William James war is a drug. He's content in the thick of it. Even when he ventures way off task, getting both he and his squad into horrible scenarios (discovering children surgically implanted with bombs), there's a sense that he's exactly where he wants to be. This is a bracing and honest look at what war does to soldiers.



Grave of the Fireflies

RELEASE DATE 1988

Studio Ghibli has a gift for transforming somewhat harsh subject matters into lush, playful movies. The Japanese animation house outdoes itself with this stunning story, a bleak reminder that it's children who suffer the most from warfare. The use of animation achieves a power that live-action probably wouldn't have matched, as the movie follows Seita and Setsuko, two kids orphaned after American bombers destroy their hometown. Heralded by many as one of the most moving anti-war films, it's a true tear-jerker from start to finish.



Fury

RELEASE DATE 2014

One of the lesser known titles on this list, Fury follows the exploits of a single tank crew in 1945, as the Allies make their push into Nazi Germany. Don't let the pretty-boy Hollywood cast fool you - this is a war movie as serious and unflinching as most, and it has plenty to say about the horrors of WW2. While Brad Pitt occasionally hams up his role as Don 'Wardaddy' Collier, it's a necessary spark of optimism as the rest of the crew - excellently portrayed by the likes of Shia LaBeouf (yes, really), Michael Pena, and John Bernthal - get picked off one-by-one in the face of overwhelming odds. It has a strong Saving Private Ryan vibe, but tells a more intimate story about the war.



Zero Dark Thirty

RELEASE DATE 2012

Telling the story of the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, Zero Dark Thirty is probably one of the quietest war movies you'll ever see. It starts with a slow build-up of surveillance, and ends in one of the most taut battles you're likely to see. The eerie silence - punctuated by the muted thuds of suppressed gunfire - creates an unbearable amount of tension as the US Navy SEALs search for their target in the movie's climactic scenes. Slow-burning and perfectly paced, director Kathryn Bigelow quite rightly received praise for the authentic and unglamorous depiction of one of the 21st century's most infamous military actions.



The Killing Fields

RELEASE DATE 1984

Based on the experiences of two journalists during the era in which Vietnamese communist forces, the Khmer Rouge, entered Cambodia and instigated a war with the Cambodian national army. Sam Waterson and John Malkovich play Schanberg and Rockoff, a couple of Americans who team up with local Cambodian reporter Dith Pran, to capture the truth behind Pol Pot's savage regime. This is a brutal and stirring piece of filmmaking, inspired by an article written by the real Schanberg and Pran. The title refers to a number of fields where the bodies of a million Cambodians remain, after being killed and buried by the Khmer Rouge. That term was coined by Dith Pran, who saw those fields with his own eyes.



The Imitation Game

RELEASE DATE 2004

Benedict Cumberbatch is perfect for the role of Alan Turing, in this movie about how the code-breakers at Bletchley Park managed to crack the infamous German Enigma code. As with most films here it's a real thriller, but The Imitation Game has more of a heart than most, as it focuses on the life and untimely death of Turing, using the war as more of a backdrop than focus. And, much like most other great war movies, we still can't quite believe the overwhelming odds overcome by the characters, despite knowing the actual, historical events on which it's based. In fact, it makes the eventual denouement that much more tragic, as we know it's heavily grounded in reality.



Downfall

RELEASE DATE 2004

Even dictators have their bad days, but humanising Hitler (while far from excusing him) makes his crimes all the greater. Downfall takes a fly-on-the-wall approach to the Fuhrer's final ten days, told through the point-of-view of his secretary. In fact, it's the real life Traudi Junge whose voice is heard opening the movie. Much was made of how the film paints a realistic portrait of a monstrous man, who displayed kindness to his staff while seconds later utter contempt for millions he sent to their deaths. It's a near-perfect piece of filmmaking, thanks to Bruno Ganz eerily-precise depiction of Hitler.



All Quiet on the Western Front

RELEASE DATE 1930

Boredom, hunger and the ever-present threat of sudden death transform an episodic story into Hollywood's definitive account of trench warfare. The original film from 1930 is the role for which actor Lew Ayers is best known, as German soldier Paul Bumer. One of several schoolboys convinced by their patriotic schoolteacher to enlist in the army, he and his friends come to learn that doing your bit for your country means sacrificing everything.



Dunkirk

RELEASE DATE 2017

What makes Dunkirk such a great war movie? It's probably the sound. While the plot and pacing is Nolan at his peak, the acting performances excellent, and the visual effects superb... it's the sound that really takes your breath away. When all the soldiers are taking cover on the beach, for example, it's an incredible contrast between the chaos of the dropped bombs, and the eerie silence of the troops all standing up and reforming their queues. The spitfire engines? Visceral. The sound of water rushing into various boats as they sink, accompanied by the screams of drowning men? Chilling. Dunkirk isn't a thrilling war movie, or the most didactic, but the way it uses sound (or the notable absence of it) to create the menace and horror of each scene is second to none.



Saving Private Ryan

RELEASE DATE 1998

What's one man's life worth? That's the staggeringly huge question Steven Spielberg sets out to answer in his blistering 1998 actioner. Its opening sequence never lets up as a US squad hits the beaches of Normandy, aiming to track down the last surviving son of a single American family and return him safely home. The cast assembled here is terrific, with all of them on the top of their game and working together to bring out the best in each other's performances. There's nothing flashy or glitzy about the harrowing truths of war here, as Tom Hanks' leader pushes his team into the darkest parts of the conflict. This is a brutal and totally unflinching dip into wartime violence.



The Deer Hunter

RELEASE DATE 1978

The Russian roulette scene is perhaps what Michael Cimino's Vietnam drama is best known for, a moment that epitomises the utter hopelessness of a man torn apart emotionally by his tour of Vietnam. He's one of three childhood friends, who sign up to serve their country. By focusing as much on the buddies' home lives as well as their combat experiences, Cimino paints a tragic portrait of a blue-collar Pennsylvania community destroyed by war. It's a striking piece of cinema that cuts between their initial excitement and the harsh reality, brought to life by an epic cast that includes Christopher Walken, Robert De Niro, Nick Savage, and Meryl Streep.



Inglourious Basterds

RELEASE DATE 2009

Tarantino says the dialogue he's most proud of is spoken during Inglourious Basterds' opening sequence, when the 'Jew Hunter' Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz) calmly interrogates a French dairy farmer, believing that he's harbouring Jewish refugees in his basement. It's testament to Tarantino's confidence that this scene is 15 minutes long - a terrific start to a World War 2 flick that's all action with a giant splat of camp comedy thrown in. The Basterds of the title are part of the plot, that weaves in a dastardly scheme to take out the Third Reich's highest-ranking officials in a movie theater. Beautifully nutty.



Das Boot

RELEASE DATE 1981

Wolfgang Petersen's film is really one of a few examples where the term 'epic' can be used with authority. Das Boot runs just a shade under five hours. It's had trimmed theatrical releases, TV miniseries cuts, and extended home video director's edits: all of them pack the same thudding truth. War is hell wherever you are, as a submarine full of German sailors face boredom, claustrophobia, and terror under the waves. That terror is boldly presented, as the crew, bound by orders not to take prisoners, watch as the crew of a torpedoed British tanker goes down. Bleak.



The Great Escape

RELEASE DATE 1963

You know the theme. That uplifting ditty that's drafted into so many movies and TV shows as a way to give authority the finger, without... well, having to literally show it. But The Great Escape gave us much more than that. A fun, heart-warming adventure about a band of allied POWs during World War 2, who are captured by the Germans and sent to a high security Stalag in Poland. The film's two leads, Steve McQueen and Richard Attenborough, rally together a hodgepodge of prisoners to dig three tunnels. The great thing is, nobody is under any illusions about getting home. So why do it? Simply: to piss off the Nazis. You've got to admire their balls.



The Bridge on the River Kwai

RELEASE DATE 1957

Regarded as one of the finest World War II movies ever made. *Bridge on the River Kwai* is a fictional story surrounding the construction of the Burma railway. Alec Guinness stars as a British Colonel who, along with his platoon of men, is forced by the Japanese to construct the bridge. But the Colonel's alliances become unclear as he collaborates with his enforcers, believing the British Army should be remembered for its sterling construction work. A strange turn of events, certainly, and one that's brought to a head by William Holden's American officer who swoops in to try and blow up the bridge. Heart-wrenching stuff.



10

Platoon

RELEASE DATE 1986

Platoon comes with an added boost of authenticity as writer-director Oliver Stone lived through the horrors of the Vietnam War. Stone was part of the US infantry for 14 months, channeling his experiences into his ensemble flick that follows Charlie Sheen's character as he jacks in his studies to serve his country. It's believed that this is the first Vietnam film to hail directly from someone who saw action. Stone knew himself how conflict rocks the psyche. Likewise, the squalor of jungle warfare has rarely been more palpable, but Stone puts things in perspective in a grueling scorched earth raid on a Vietnamese village.



9

Darkest Hour

RELEASE DATE 2017

There have been many on-screen depictions on Churchill, but Gary Oldman's aces the lot with this 2018 Oscars-contender. Played with a mixture of pompousness, stubbornness, and a necessary sprinkling of humanity (which admittedly runs very saccharine in a couple of scenes), Oldman's Churchill perfectly encapsulates the type of leader that was needed to defy Hitler in WW2. His politically awkward position also gives great background as to why he wasn't retained as Prime Minister after the war – something few movies have managed to explain adequately. This film features no real action, and only focuses on a narrow part of WW2, but it stands firmly as one of the best war movies ever made, thanks to some excellent pacing, heaps of tension, and one of the greatest performances you'll see of a major historical figure.



8

The Pianist

RELEASE DATE 2002

To fully immerse himself in the character of pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman, Adrien Brody embraced *The Method*. He dumped his girlfriend, sold his belongings, gave up his home and lived as the Jewish pianist did during his time in the Warsaw ghetto. That commitment shows on screen, and is likely what earned Brody his Oscar as the inner torment suffered by his character is matched perfectly by his physical transformation. The film is based on a true story, and serves as a stark reminder of the lengths Jewish Europeans had to go to in order to survive.



The Thin Red Line

RELEASE DATE 1998

20 years away from filmmaking and Terrence Malick returned with *The Thin Red Line*. A lingering, slow-drawl of a war film that shows how mankind's desire to fight one another devastates nature. Cut down from a much, MUCH longer version, the finished movie surprised a lot of the cast who learned in the theater that their roles were bigger/smaller than expected. It's the thin red line of the title, which is according to Malick what separates the sane from the mad, that's best brought to life over and over in the performances of its soldiers. In particular? Nick Nolte's unhinged Colonel; possibly his best-ever role.



Paths of Glory

RELEASE DATE 1957

Kubrick took inspiration from Humphrey Cobb's novel a World War I Colonel who refused to walk his men to certain death. Kirk Douglas is steely as Colonel Dax, the commanding officer of four soldiers sentenced to death, who turns to his pre-war civilian life as a lawyer to defend the men. Along the way he becomes strongly disillusioned with the madness of his superiors, part of Kubrick's strong anti-war sentiment making its way into the main part of the plot. As heavy-handed as that may be, it's the final twang that finds the survivors of Dax's company gathered in a local inn, knocking back the ale, and listening to a local woman sing, that packs the real punch. It's seeing Dax watch his men, eyes brimming with tears in the moment, knowing that they don't have long until the next big push.



Full Metal Jacket

RELEASE DATE 1987

This dark film takes aim at the Vietnam war, told through the eyes of Matthew Modine's Joker, a man who hedges his bets by scrawling 'Born to kill' on his helmet but also wears a peace symbol, to show "the duality of man". Yeah, he's quite a character, and this is a film full of complex, troubled individuals each dealing with the pressures put upon them by their intense drill instructor. R. Lee Ermey's role is one of the most memorable of the whole movie, his torrent of insults designed to toughen up the men, the source of an hour-long improvisational rant. This is war, Kubrick-style.



Casablanca

RELEASE DATE 1942

Hollywood's definitive wartime propaganda pic blends together the melodrama of lovers who can't be together with the harsh reality of conflict. Michael Curtiz's World War II classic has two top-of-their-game actors in the lead roles, Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, as Rick and Ilsa. Rick's a bartender in Casablanca, Ilsa's an old flame in town with her new husband, a notorious agent who's out to bring down the Nazis. The great source of tension between them stems from Rick, who can't stand idly by when he has the power to help Ilsa's man. It's chemistry like theirs that's rarely seen onscreen nowadays, a result of their off-set friendship, which also gave the film its most memorable one-liner. *Casablanca* is the wartime romance to end 'em all.

3

Come and See

RELEASE DATE 1985

Some of the most horrific images shot by wartime correspondents include children. They're innocents, in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's that child's eye view of war which drives home the horrors of the Nazi-occupied Soviet Republic in *Come and See*. Inspired by the experiences of a survivor, the movie follows young lad Florya (Aleksey Kravchenko) as he's lured away from his family to help fight the Resistance. It's only when he attempts to return home that he witnesses the hallucinatory terrors implied by the title (e.g. villagers herded into a church, into which grenades are then thrown). Hard-hitting in its unflinching approach to the material, there's no stone unturned when it comes the atrocities the Nazis committed in Belarus.

2

Schindler's List

RELEASE DATE 1993

Steven Spielberg received a bit of a critical mauling for ignoring the entire six million who lost their lives in the Holocaust, but this movie still remains heart-wrenching, tear-jerking stuff. His effort to zero in on 1000 or so fortunate survivors, as a way to highlight the larger tragedy, nevertheless works. He brings his unique touch to a story that's about the dichotomy of man: within us all is the power to commit unspeakable acts of evil alongside the power to do untold acts of kindness. The story is based on the efforts of one Oskar Schindler – played here by Liam Neeson – a man who chose to help as many Jews as possible through his business endeavours, proving that in our darkest hours, there is light.

1

Apocalypse Now (1979)

RELEASE DATE 1979

The hallucinatory madness depicted in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* is unlike any other Vietnam movie. There's nothing remotely normal about the film's take on war; this isn't a typical tale of 'us vs. them'. Martin Sheen's Captain Willard is sent on a kill mission. It's up to him to take out the seriously unhinged Colonel Kurtz, who's gone off the deep end. Watching Willard himself try and keep it together amidst Wagnerian helicopter attacks, tigers, Playboy bunnies, and Dennis Hopper's mental photographer is a pure cinematic delight. It begs the question; who's really losing their mind here? Sheen or the absolutely mad as a hatter Marlon Brando as Kurtz? The casualties of war shown here are the minds of men.





THE DIVISION 2 FEELS LIKE A GREAT GAME THAT'S YET TO SHOW ME WHY I SHOULD CARE

There's a lot to like in *The Division 2* but we've yet to see what the game really has to offer. **Leon Hurley**

WITHIN SECONDS OF PLAYING THE DIVISION 2 AT DEVELOPER MASSIVE'S STUDIOS ALL THE OLD HABITS COME FLOODING BACK: WE DO JUMPING JACKS IN THE STAGING AREA. OUR RECENTLY ACTIVATED, HIGHLY-TRAINED, WORLD-SAVING SLEEPER AGENTS PASS THE TIME WITH EMOTES LIKE THE MACARENA AND SLOW HAND CLAPS, AS TECHY PEOPLE FIDDLE WITH SERVER STUFF TO GET THINGS STARTED. AT ONE POINT SOMEONE SEES A DOG IN-GAME AND WE SCRAMBLE DESPERATELY OVER ABANDONED CARS AND PLANT COVERED WALLS TO CONFIRM THAT, YES, IT'S DEFINITELY A DOG. TECHNICALLY WE'RE MEANT TO BE RESTORING ORDER TO AN EPIDEMIC RAVAGED WASHINGTON DC BUT, YOU KNOW, DOG.

This, along with the direct PvP multiplayer I'll get to later, was largely great fun (although you can't actually pet the dog) because messing about with other people in a video game is nearly always great fun. However, the rest of it – the main city exploring and online four player co-op part of the game – is harder to call right now. Not because there's anything obviously wrong with

it – the gunplay and cover mechanics feel great for example – but, rather, it was just presented in a slightly empty and hard to get excited about way.

GUN GAME

It's mainly because a large part of what I played involved exploring the Dark Zone: the series' high loot/high risk PvEvP area. It's a lawless area where you fight both in-game enemies and other players to steal the best gear, and then fight to secure an extraction zone to escape. It's a place where you can go 'rogue' by killing other agents/players and, in *The Division 1* at least, is a terrifyingly fraught high stakes experience as you gamble the risk and reward of collecting good gear, against losing it all in a shootout with a rival group as a helicopter lowers over you both.

My time for *The Division 2* largely focused on being dropped cold into the Dark Zone with no real set up, or reason. There was no context, objective, story or even, most importantly, risk, because obviously I'm fighting to extract demo loot I'll never see again. It's hard to really get a 'feel' for the overall experience this way. Mechanically, it is all very strong, with satisfying shootouts full of chunky

cover mechanics and great gadgets (setting a hovering attack drone on one enemy as you deal with another never gets old). But the odd decision to let us experience the game by just sort of wandering about a bit, triggering mobs, lacked purpose – once you've fought 20 very bulletproof men in hoodies pouring out of a door for no reason, you've sort of fought them all. In this case without any overall purpose or direction it all felt a bit like an extended bot mode.

From the hours I played, all the life in the game came from the people I played with – shouting out threats, rallying on a difficult to kill boss, getting a downed player back up and all those little human interactions. That is a good sign for the *Division's* online world, but I was playing with people I knew who were in the room with me. That's a much different feedback loop compared to the three online matchmaking randos I'm likely to get when I play in the real world. I would have really liked to have experienced some actual missions and texture beyond 'kill all the enemies in a given area' to get a read on the larger game. It was an odd, unexplained choice to show to show the game off in a way that actually revealed so little. It going to be fun in single



LEFT Save Washington from... wait, do we really want to?



RIGHT The Division 2's gunplay is as good as ever.



||
MASSIVE IS PROMISING A WEALTH OF EXPANSION CONTENT OVER THE FIRST YEAR

player? Will the campaign have plenty of variety and missions? Will I have a sense of purpose? And so on...

FIGHT TO SURVIVE

To be clear: I'm not down on The Division 2. As I mentioned, there is a lot to like, I just don't feel as if I saw enough difference in what the Dark Zone offered to really be able to infer much about the rest of the game beyond the solid shooting. It's also encouraging that when the game dials into that shooting for its more traditional PvP multiplayer, the results are excellent, leveraging the game's apparently "one-to-one" scale recreation of Washington DC to create some sharp and unusually spaced map designs. With a tighter focus on purpose (mainly kill the other team or take territories) it uses that great gun feel to create tactically

rewarding battles to control portions of the map; feeling a lot more like realistic take on urban warfare than a lot of more 'pure' military shooters.

It all means, however, that if you asked me if The Division 2 was any good at this point I'd have to answer with a shrugged 'maybe?' There's a firm gameplay foundation in place and a beautiful open world, building a take on post-apocalyptic Washington seven months after the original game. It's a fantastic and verdant urban mess full of abandoned cars and overgrown checkpoints; full of animals that scatter as you approach, interesting locations and landmarks created by the bio-attack, or the subsequent aftermath. But I don't feel like I've done enough... stuff, to really say whether there's a plentiful range of substance for a game that could

be offering tens to hundreds of hours of gameplay.


Massive is promising a wealth of expansion content over the first year however, and almost every feature the studio extolled for the sequel seemed to build on past updates and learnings from the original game. So things like better gear level equalising in basic Dark Zone areas so everyone has an equal chance; the fact that the Dark Zone is now in three different areas; or the fact the game uses Washington's more mixed environments to add a greater map variety. Based on all that, and the good mechanical foundation of what I've played, I'm hopeful about what The Division 2 could be, but until I see a wider slice of what it has to offer, it's a game that's yet to deliver on that promise.

INTERVIEW

WORLD AT WAR

*INTERVIEW: **Ben Mansill**, one-time War Thunder tragic, has an illuminating chat to game designer Dmitry Gordeev about War Thunder's new World War mode.*





WE'RE DEFINITELY COMMITTED TO DEVELOPING THE WORLD WAR MODE EVEN FURTHER, BOTH BASED ON PLAYER FEEDBACK AND OUR OWN IDEAS FOR THE MODE.

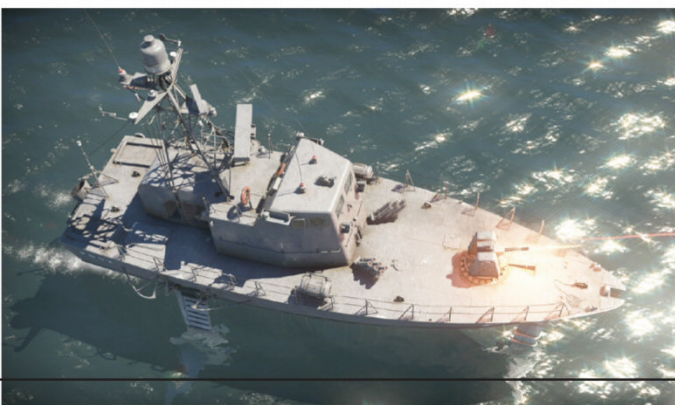
For new players that may not be familiar with War Thunder, how would you describe the game?

At its core, War Thunder is a realistic vehicular combat game. That means if you ever wanted to know how it feels to, for example, fly in a P-51 Mustang or drive a T-72 main battle tank, this is the game for you. You can try more than 1300 aircraft, helicopters, tanks and ships from the 1930s to the 2000s and clash with players from all over the world in epic battles in the air, on land and at sea. One of the game's key focuses is accessibility, so all you need to get started are a mouse and keyboard or gamepad to enjoy a realistic, physics-based vehicle experience, which before you could only get in hardcore simulator games - but in contrast to those, War Thunder has millions of other players to fight alongside you.

What would you tell a player that might have wandered away from War Thunder in recent years who might be thinking of getting back into it now?

Over the past couple of years, War Thunder has seen massive development and improvements. Every couple of months we release major content updates including vehicles, maps and features, while in parallel improving game balance, fixing bugs and fine-tuning the game economy. For whatever reason you may have left the game, since the game is free to play, now is as good a time as any to see just how much new content and other improvements have been made to the game. And hopefully we have addressed whatever made you stop playing in the past - and if not, then do not hesitate to let us know, so we can try to do better next time.





What's the status of the new mode and how has player feedback been?

The first season of World War Open Beta has just finished and all War Thunder players were able to take part. We've received a lot of much-appreciated feedback during this first large-scale public test, with many great ideas on how to further improve World War.

Players liked several of the key features we presented in this first public version, for example the global operations map, where commanders were not only able to control one team or squadron (clan), but rather take charge of a whole faction. World War mode also introduces completely new types of missions, allowing players to change the course of historical battles using historically accurate vehicles - an experience we have heard a lot of positive voices on. We also received positive feedback about the extra rewards for participation and victory in World War.

In regards to the feedback to further improve the mode, we've heard several suggestions about simplifying the user interface - many of which we have already acted upon, with further changes to come. Another factor and a focus of this first season was to try the mode's balance. Given that commanders are in charge of moving forces on the map and initiating engagements, some battles in World War mode see forces of severely different strengths meeting each other. While we have opted to auto-decide those battles where one side faces an overwhelming enemy, we consider less severe instances of asymmetrical strength a feature of this mode, as it adds another strategic layer of skill to the mode, namely how well commanders distribute the forces available to them. Of course, we will closely monitor the balance of the entire scenarios in general and are analyzing data and feedback from the players to make adjustments where necessary.

Will there be any dramatic changes to World War now that you have seen the results of the beta?

We're definitely committed to developing the World War mode even further, both based on player feedback and our own ideas for the mode. We're planning to introduce new scenarios, new battle mechanics, new mode variations and more. World War scenarios will also employ ships and modern ground vehicles at some point in the future. These changes and additions will be incremental to what we currently have, which means that there won't be any "dramatic" changes fundamentally altering the mode. The fundamentals of the mode have been

tested for two years in closed beta before launching it to the public, which allowed us to waterproof its key features and make them as final as possible before going public. Now, we want to focus on new features and quality-of-life improvements.

What technical challenges did you face to get World War up and running and working smoothly for so many simultaneous players, and how did you overcome them?

The most important thing is that we've introduced a completely new game subsystem - the global map of operations. A group of commanders on each side manages tokens that represent armies. Commanders can move them, initiate clashes between armies of various types and they can even call artillery strikes from artillery units right in this interface. The landscape type is also important: forests, for example, slow down armies and initiating combat near a city will result in the battle being held on an urban location.

As the amount of simultaneous players participating in one operation can reach several hundreds, everyone should be able to receive the right information in time to make the right decisions. This information flow between the players and spectators was the key technical challenge because the inner structure of each operation is quite complex. That's why we had to work hard on both client and server optimisation for this mode. We've introduced a version control system for each element - for each single battle, army, unit in the army and other objects - and we cache this data to reduce the traffic and CPU load. Some of the in-game data that is time-based - for example, an army's movement and the battle start counter - is calculated by the game client independently, without sending requests to the server. The client is getting notifications from the server only for updates that cannot be predicted by the client (i.e. when the battle ends).

In order to be sure that our servers will be able to handle the load, we've made numerous stress tests - we emulated a ridiculously high number of spectators or a huge number of simultaneous operations to find weak spots. It was not easy, but the first season of World War showed us that we managed to do this right. For the final test before the public launch we've developed a special AI system that moved virtual armies in hundreds of test operations. Plenty of active War Thunder players passively and invisibly "participated" in them by getting the test data updates as if they were browsing the World War mode menus or something like this.

And further to last - getting the gameplay and balance right must have

been an incredible challenge, and there's nothing like it elsewhere. What were the most interesting or surprising factors you had to deal with?

The most interesting thing about all the historical missions and modes is that we cannot just define the "right" balance and leave it like that forever. Even when we do not change anything in the initial setting for the battling sides, the game itself changes with time. There is also a constant influx of new players, some of them have a completely new gameplay style and even that can change the balance. It was like that for the missions that were part of the World War Chronicles mode before. So we are ready to check the balance and improve it as soon as we see that this is needed.

Noticeably, statistics that we collected during the first public season proved to be somewhat surprising compared to the data we collected during the closed test. While, as anticipated, the public test mostly attracted seasoned players, their coordination and effectiveness in battle wasn't as high as our closed test data suggested they would be, meaning we had and still have to make adjustments to the balance accordingly, both in regards to missions and the entire operations themselves.

But the hardest parameter to balance for the World War mode is the ratio between players that play as commanders and regular players – their "soldiers". We do not regulate this ratio, but it still is very important for the mode. When there are too few commanders, there are only a few operations and missions to participate in. Accordingly, if there are too many commanders, we have a lot of operations and missions but not enough soldiers to populate them and the player experience is not as good as intended. We've already introduced several fixes to this problem but there is still work to do here.

How do you incentivise players to work together in a team with a common goal, and encourage them to use a vehicle type that may not be their favourite in World War?

The mission objectives themselves are designed to motivate players to coordinate their actions and work together to achieve success. The assault on heavily fortified positions in a "Defence" type mission, for example, cannot be won by one player alone, but only as a team. The players understand that and wait for their teammates, check the situation on the map and coordinate their attack to strike together, when the time is right.

In a World War mission the battle conditions can dramatically change. For example, when you're constantly



attacked by enemy aviation and your anti-air guns are already wiped out, your commander can send a team of fighter planes for help and turn the tide of battle. In this case, each player can respawn on a fighter plane even if he does not own a fighter of this nation.

This, by the way, underlines another good aspect of the World War mode: All players can use the vehicles the commander assigns to a battle, even those vehicles that they have not yet unlocked and bought. This makes World War a great opportunity to drive tanks or fly planes that are normally not yet available for you.

World War was always the end goal for War Thunder, as you said when the game first launched. Will World War eventually become the sole game mode replacing all others?

The World War mode won't replace the classic "Random Battles" or other existing modes, but rather is an expansion to the already diverse list of game modes that allow players to fight in the air, on land and at sea, both versus other players or computer-controlled opponents, alone or as a part of a squadron. The global operations map, where the hundreds of players can try to change the course of historical battles, is a new experience that we're happy to present to the ever-growing community of War Thunder players.

Do people from particular global regions tend to play for their country in the game? Is any nation more popular than others in World War?

This is true not only for the World War mode, but for the game as a whole. People tend to focus on the nation where they actually live or a neighbouring nation, but that does not mean they play this nation exclusively.

But for the World War Mode specifically, geography and nationality are not the only factors: Some players, for example, base their decision on the list of fully upgraded vehicles they own and which are also eligible for this scenario. Some players follow the decision of their squadron or team leader and some just join any side that has free slots.





World War is currently in beta, and we know that Gaijin likes to make sure things are perfect before declaring it out of beta. So how is World War looking on that front? How long before it's out of beta?

World War mode has been in closed beta for a long time, so the actual launch of open beta went smoothly. As soon as we polish the mode based on first season player feedback and produce enough new content for the mode, we'll launch the next season of World War.

Is the ultimate goal to have an enormous single battlefield that players can drop in and out of and where the tide gradually swings one way or the other over a long period?

World War is already this kind of battlefield where the players can drop in and drop out at any moment, joining any mission they're interested in. Every action of the player influences the overall flow of the operation on the global map. Every destroyed tank, every used bomb or rocket are deducted from the arsenal of the corresponding army. On the other hand, there are other ways to play War Thunder and always will be.

Will RB or Sim ever be supported in World War?

World War was planned as the unified global mode in which all our players would clash with each other, regardless of their specific preferences in regards to difficulty. What we'd like to stress it that it would be wrong to assume the World War mode simply runs on "Arcade" settings - in fact, Realistic Battles (RB) is the base difficulty setting for this mode. The only difference between the specific World War mode settings and the Realistic Battles players know from participating in Random Battles are the addition of markers for tanks and anti-air guns, while the differences for the airplanes are even smaller.

THE HARDEST PARAMETER TO BALANCE FOR THE WORLD WAR MODE IS THE RATIO BETWEEN PLAYERS THAT PLAY AS COMMANDERS AND REGULAR PLAYERS

What about infantry? Or is that just not within what War Thunder is - it being vehicle-based?

Given that in War Thunder, all players start the battle on a vehicle, playable infantry would be a tough addition to implement and balance properly - at least without fundamentally changing what we currently know as "War Thunder". But of course, we do find the prospect of infantry combat involving vehicles very exciting. Hence, we teamed up with Darkflow Software to develop the squad-based shooter Enlisted (www.enlisted.net), in which you - hopefully soon! - will be able to experience just that, and more!



THE **COD MODERN WARFARE 3** FANS WHO PREFER TO PLAY ON PS3 THAN BUY INTO BLACK OPS 4 ON PS4

Meet the community attempting to keep one of the most divisive Call of Duty games alive. **Luke Winkie**

JACOB AND BRANDON ARE TWO 16-YEAR OLDS IN ONTARIO, AND THEY'RE WORKING DAY AND NIGHT TO RESURRECT MODERN WARFARE 3. EVERY COUPLE OF DAYS, THEY POST A MISSIVE TO THE GAME'S MOSTLY DORMANT SUBREDDIT, PETITIONING THE MASSES FOR A QUICK ROUND OF HEADQUARTERS, OR KILL CONFIRMED, OR TEAM DEATHMATCH, LIVE AND UNEDITED FROM DILAPIDATING PS3 FIRMWARE. FOR THE MOST PART, THE QUERIES ARE LEFT UNANSWERED, WHICH HAS MADE THEM ESPECIALLY EAGER TO JUMP ON A SKYPE CALL WITH ME TO HELP GET THE WORD OUT. IT'S A TUESDAY EVENING, THREE SHORT DAYS AWAY FROM THE LAUNCH OF BLACK OPS 4 AND ITS AN AUDACIOUS REENVISIONING OF THE CALL OF DUTY FORMULA - BUT THESE BOYS BARELY CARE, AS THEY TELL ME EXACTLY HOW ARDUOUS IT IS TO KEEP SOAP MACTAVISH ALIVE.

"We came back [to Modern Warfare 3] a month or two ago and we noticed a dramatic drop of players. It's very rare to find games now," laments Jacob. "It's a really good game, I love it so much, and it sucks that it takes an hour to get into a match."

IN WITH THE OLD, OUT WITH THE NEW

It wasn't always like this. Over the course of the eight years since Modern Warfare 3's release, Jacob has occasionally orbited back to its multiplayer to find a small, vibrant community of players. Even the best Call of Duty games are only as alive as the weight on its bandwidth - which means that older entries in the franchise can be rendered essentially unplayable as people pick up and move on for greener

pastures and higher definitions - but there's always a few holdouts ready and willing to stand against the rising tide. It's a stubbornness that's magnified even more by the unyielding yearly mandate Activision enforces on its triptych of studios, and that's something I've been thinking about lately, as this industry pivots into its nascent, service-driven model. So much work is dumped into every single one of these games, only for them to be savagely supplanted and uprooted by their own creators.

In the grand scheme of things, Modern Warfare 3 didn't distinguish itself particularly well. In 2011, it felt like the first hiccup in Call of Duty's lengthy uncontested reign, which cracked open the door for Battlefield and Counter-Strike. So at first I found it odd that these two boys were so eager to pump blood back into a fairly anonymous vein (for those wondering, no, there's not much of a Call of Duty: Ghosts scene these days). But they quickly remind me that falling in love with a game is rarely a logical process. No, it's all about the incidentals and particulars. For Brandon, Modern Warfare 3 captured a heavy, dark-sky military ennui that slowly drifted out of the series as Black Ops got goofier and Advanced Warfare got Halo-ier. "Now people are jumping around with jetpacks in rainbow kits," he laments.

Jacob has a similar perspective. He

was tired of staring at the sky. The verticality of the more recent games were interesting, he says, but you can only eat a crossmap headshot from some wallrunning jamoke enough times before wanting to retire to a quiet, simple life where the only enemies on your mind are those who have both feet stuck firmly to the ground. Modern Warfare 3, he says, is an ideal summation of that formula.


WAR NEVER CHANGES

I'm not sure any of that is objectively true or untrue, but it is interesting how Activision has picked its spots on the parts of the Call of Duty legacy the company has deemed indispensable. Modern Warfare Remastered was an obvious choice for its historical significance, but fans of other entries in the churn are forced to fend for themselves. There is

“IT'S A REALLY GOOD GAME, I LOVE IT SO MUCH, AND IT SUCKS THAT IT TAKES AN HOUR TO GET INTO A MATCH.”

no better example of this than Call of Duty: World at War, which today remains perhaps the most ephemeral title in the franchise's history. (It was developed by Treyarch, and it shifted the focus back to World War 2 one year after the first Modern Warfare and its incredibly successful pivot to contemporary armories.) Naturally, the game was met with sullen indifference from critics; a retreat, a cash-in, a sign of things to come.

And yet, today World at War remains one of the most popular Call of Duty



games on the planet. It is kept alive by a goofy, tossed-off multiplayer module, added last-minute by a development team that was nursing a heavy Left 4 Dead habit. The name, of course, was Nazi Zombies, which was then limited to exactly one map.

Zombies became a phenomenon, and Treyarch's calling card every time it releases a new title. The latest incarnation, Black Ops 4, is a ridiculous, shockingly verbose blunderbuss of nonsense. It features an interlocking RPG-lite class system, a boatload of lore, an eyebrow-raising alchemy mechanic. And yet, there's still an obstinate few who have decided, in their own private canon, that World at War is a cut above the rest. This was hammered home to me when I stumbled into a Discord channel and met an 11-year-old and a 14-year-old who told me as much. "Nostalgia," they each said, when I asked why they weren't playing something else.

"[World at War] is where it all started," says another channel regular, who goes by Carnage. "I think it's the best Zombies because it's the simplest. You can just hop on and play a match, whereas in these other games, they have added so much that if you hop on a game, and you don't know how to use all the new stuff, you're doomed to fail early on."

Carnage reiterates that it's not necessarily a bad thing that Treyarch has iterated on that original Zombies mode, but then again, you only have your first love once. He also cites the colorful, still-active mod scene, where people continue to import custom maps into that dusty old IW3 engine. Call of Duty will trudge into an endless horizon; hundreds of developers on a ceaseless quest to impress new audiences, to reinvent the wheel. I wonder how they would feel to know that there are many who are content, and will continue to be content, with just the way things are.

For Tom

FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE...

The 10 best Tom Clancy games of all time.
Andy Hartup, Connor Sheridan

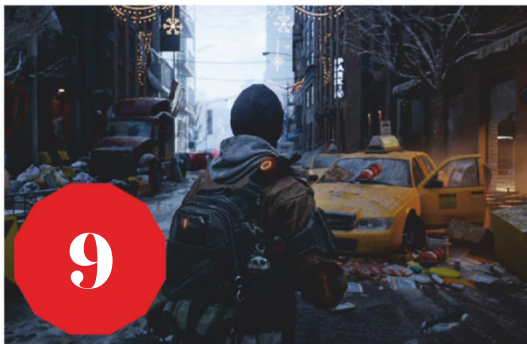
What does it mean for a game to have that “Tom Clancy’s” logo with that little tactical man in the goggles on top? If you started with the Rainbow Six series, it meant you were in for an intensely tactical shooting experience, where studying maps and carefully diagramming assault routes was the only path to victory. If Splinter Cell was your introduction to the Clancy clan, it meant thoughtful stealth fused with “it could happen tomorrow” stories of shadow governments and insurrections. Or if you started with HAWX, er, sorry about that. The late author has lent his name to a veritable universe that has assembled games for every interest at this point, as long as you’re into highly detailed military machinery. Let’s take a look at the best ones.





Tom Clancy's Endwar

Endwar made fools of us all. When voice commands were still achingly cool, Ubi dished up this strategy game from the Clancy universe that you could play entirely vocally. Obviously that was a recipe for disaster, as frustrated armchair generals all over the world started inserting increasingly strong swears into their orders when the game fudged it all up. However, underneath all that is a fine strategy game with some delightfully well-designed maps to scrap in. Reverting to pad is a far from ideal solution, but it means you get to almost enjoy one of the few RTS titles that actually worked on console. Y'know, before XCOM: Enemy Unknown showed up and everyone just conceded defeat.



Tom Clancy's The Division

At first, The Division feels like it's trying to do a lot of different things and not quite excelling at any of them. Then the truth dawns upon you: this is Destiny with a cover system and beanie caps. The Division makes so much more sense after that point, and if you approach it with that Destiny mindset, you're bound to have a good time: for instance, grinding through missions for loot can be a chore, but not if you bring along friends and tweak the difficulty to match your skills. The Dark Zone is by far The Division's most unique aspect, playing like a little PvP-optional DayZ right in the middle of the map. Gear balance issues aside, it's still a uniquely tense thrill to stumble on another group of agents and size them up as potential allies or enemies, knowing they're doing the same to you.



Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Shadow Wars

The Nintendo 3DS is not ideally suited to the strengths of any Tom Clancy series. No fancy presentation like the best Splinter Cells, no robust networking features to truly suit Rainbow Six, and shooters in general have never felt great on Nintendo's handhelds. Ghost Recon Shadow Wars, however, is a freak in the Tom Clancy pantheon. Rather than a slow-paced multiplayer shooter, Shadow Wars is a tactics RPG whose bite-sized skirmishes place you in taut standoffs with a handful of specialists. It handily captures both the succulent tension of a well-executed plan and the brute theatricality of full scale Ghost Recon games, but as a turn-based XCOM-alike. Those XCOM qualities come to Shadow Wars honestly too; it was the last game XCOM creator Julian Gollop turned in for Ubisoft.



Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas

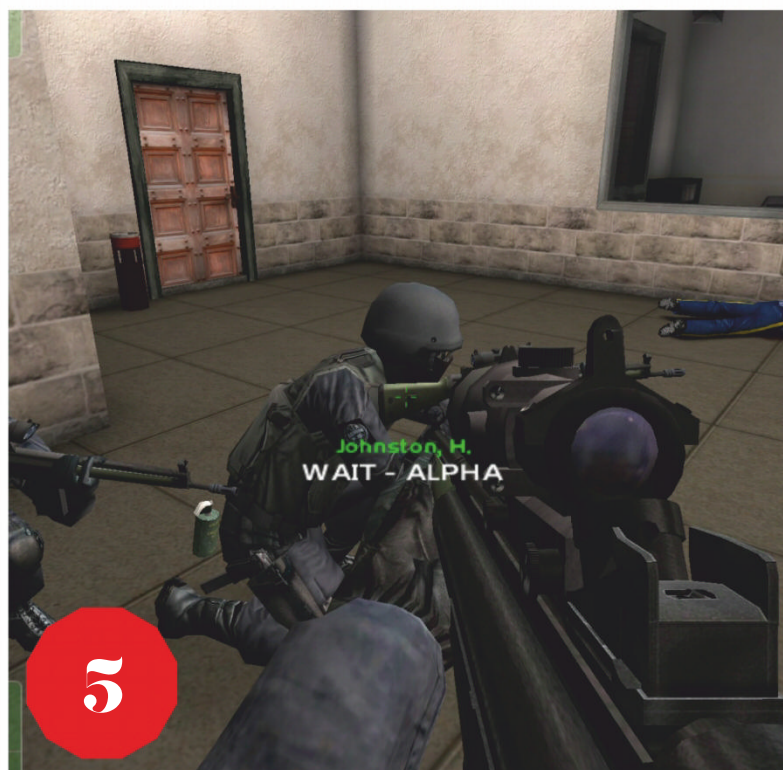
Given the rather niche concept of R6 Vegas, it's amazing that Ubi squeezed a couple of games out of it. In fact, it's rather telling that the first of them was the best. While the setting provides the glitz and glamour, the fresh gameplay features make this feel like the first Rainbow Six title truly optimised for console. Regenerating health, a third-person view for blind-firing, and context sensitive squad commands (on the d-pad) all make for a shooty-bang-bang experience that's a little more sympathetic to the less hardcore player. While this undoubtedly softens the series' appeal for some, the whole thing is still tough and military enough to satisfy. Again, though, it was probably a poor idea to bring the second game back to the city of sin without any real improvements. Does it hold up today? Well, kinda, but shouldn't you be playing Siege instead?

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DIDN'T MATTER
THAT THE GAME IS
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IT'S WONDERFULLY
'AUTHENTIC'”

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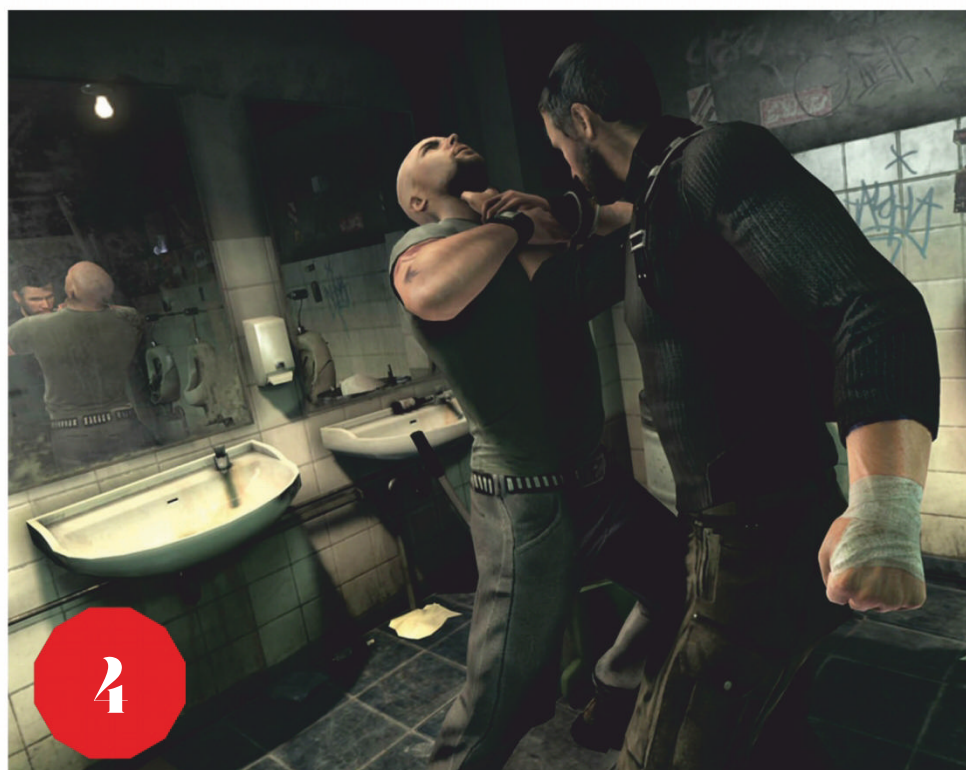
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon (2001)

Ok, so, the original Ghost Recon doesn't really hold up by today's standards. It's a rather slow, rather ugly game where the tactical shooting doesn't quite make up for the visual and presentation shortcomings. But back at the turn of the millennium, this was primo-PC gaming. Didn't matter that the game is half orienteering sim, half shooter - it's wonderfully 'authentic', has some excellent set-pieces, and genuinely rewards patience and smart tactical thinking. Games like Operation Flashpoint and ArmA pushed the painfully-slow military shooter to their zenith, but this was the acceptable face of indulging your spec-ops side.



Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3

This entry kinda counts twice. Raven Shield on PC is an exceptional game, as is the vanilla Rainbow Six 3 on Xbox. This being a console site, though, let's look at the latter. Each level is a tense squad-based crawl from start to finish - death comes quickly in Rainbow Six, so every door breach and peep around a corner has to be done oh-so-carefully-and-GODDAMN-IT-I'M-DEAD. It's such a refreshing change from other fire-and-forget frag-fests on console, and even the multiplayer has that balanced, super-lethal feel. Oh, and fun fact: this game actually has voice commands, which you can issue to cue squad orders. And they actually work.



Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Conviction

This was a new breed of sneaking when it finally appeared, battered and bruised from a troubled development cycle, in 2010. Originally pitched as Sam Fisher meets Jason Bourne, the end product wasn't quite as free-flowing and 'murder-a-man-with-a-newspaper' as promised, but the aggressive, fast-paced stealth was unlike anything seen in games. The ability to string together takedowns, increasingly terrifying the remaining grunts, in fluid motions around each self-contained stage just feels so, so good to play. Ok, the story isn't the finest in the series (despite the rather memorable scene where you forcefully attach a man's work hand to a tree-stump with your combat knife), but when the action is this smooth that barely matters. And let's not forget the fantastically tense co-op mode, which climaxes in the order to terminate your buddy before they kill you.

For Tom

||
DO ALL THE DIRTY WORK FROM A NEARBY HILLTOP WITH THEIR TRUSTY SNIPER RIFLES.

3


Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands

If you ever played the Mercenaries games, you remember the fun of tracking down high-value targets in secure compounds and expertly neutralizing them. Or just calling down a massive fuel-air bomb on the whole premises. Ghost Recon Wildlands backs off from the air-dropped ordnance in favor of making everything about those open-world surgical strikes sing. Teams of four (either in co-op or with AI buddies) can sneak into drug cartel facilities for silent takedowns, smash down the gates with explosives and machine guns, or do all the dirty work from a nearby hilltop with their trusty sniper rifles. If you can get a full squad together, Wildlands is some of the most fun you'll ever have in the Clancy-verse.

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege

While Siege received several middling reviews and attracted a smaller audience than Ubi might have hoped, time and the amazing communities that have built up around it testify to the brilliance of this tense, intimate shooter. The core mode - Siege - is so finely tuned, the maps so economically designed, they create a game beautiful in its violent simplicity. Five versus five - one team defends, the other infiltrates. A sprinkling of gadgets and tools add flavour to what is, essentially, a battle of wits and smarts between two teams. But the absolute best thing about Siege is the potential for an epic five vs one finish, with the sole survivor on a struggling team wiping out the entire opposition force by themselves, to the sound of gasps and cheers from their spectating comrades. Those moments are the rarest of gaming gems, and they make this a precious experience, indeed.

2



RESPONSIBLE
FOR MORE GASPS,
FIST-PUMPS, AND
LITRES OF SWEAT
SHED PER GAME
THAN ANY OTHER

1

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Chaos Theory

There are so many reasons why Chaos Theory is the best Clancy game out there. For starters, it's maximum Clancy – the plot focuses on a global shadow conflict that threatens to plunge the world into a new war. It's a dark, tense game, with enough plot twists and set-pieces to keep you gripped, and leading man Sam Fisher is more agile (despite being older) than ever, packing enough smart gadgets to give James Bond's Q sleepless nights. However, the star of the show is the Spies vs Mercs mode, which is the most sublime, taut, and thrilling multiplayer you're likely to experience. There's something so wonderfully balanced about it – the third-person perspective of the spies offsetting their relative fragility, while the lethality of the mercs feels sensibly restrained by the first-person view. Spies vs Mercs is responsible for more gasps, fist-pumps, and litres of sweat shed per game than any other online experience. Fact. Ish. Sadly, the game's delightful visuals have aged a little, and Spies vs Mercs can no longer be played on console (the servers have been switched off), but this remains the high-watermark for all Clancy games to date.

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“GOOD KILL,
GOOD KILL,” CHIRPS
THE AC-130’S PILOT AS
YOU ANNIHILATE SMALL
CROWDS OF RUSSIAN
NATIONALISTS FROM
ON HIGH.

WAR NEVER CHANGES

Why Call of Duty's greatest power fantasy leads to its

MODERN WARFARE'S MISSION BRIEFINGS MIGHT BE PORNOGRAPHY FOR hardcore military fetishists - ALL BRISTLING GUN BARRELS AND INTIMATE HARDWARE CLOSE-UPS - BUT THERE'S REALLY ONLY ONE VEHICLE THAT MAKES AN IMPACT DESERVING OF INFINITY WARD'S NEAR-REVERENTIAL TREATMENT. FOR A GAME THAT'S IN CONSTANT, UNABASHED THRILL TO MILITARY HARDWARE, THE AC-130 ALONE MANAGES TO COMMUNICATE THE SHEER, TERRIFYING MIGHT OF WESTERN POWER - AND THE HORRIFICALLY ONE-SIDED NATURE OF MODERN WAR.

Your first good look at the AC-130, by way of a briefing scene, offers little more than a plane covered in stats. A 25mm Gatling gun capable of firing 1,800 rounds per minute, a 40mm Bofors autocannon capable of a more modest 100 rounds per minute, and a 105mm M102 cannon, which fires 10 rounds per minute. It's an introduction that reads like a spreadsheet, and unless you're a gun nut, it does nothing to communicate the AC-130's fearsome power. It does, however, neatly foreshadow the cold detachment of the level that follows.

Until now, the player's viewpoint has been mostly limited to the perspective of US Marine Paul Jackson or SAS operative John 'Soap' MacTavish, and the previous level, Hunted, saw Soap and his squad scabbling for safety after their helicopter was shot down deep behind enemy lines in civil war-stricken Russia. Hunted is a low-key experience by Call of Duty's standards, where the outnumbered unit skulks and creeps through the Russian farmland. When the AC-130 arrives, though, everything changes, and a Russian convoy is obliterated from above.

The next level, Death From Above, carries on immediately after that scene, but switches the player's perspective. You are no longer an imperiled soldier, but a

member of the aircraft's flight crew - your view of the battle below is just a fuzzy black-and-white image on a 4:3 monitor. It's a discomfiting transition: the WWII-era COD games had vehicle sections, but they placed you in a vulnerable tank on the frontline. In this scene, Modern Warfare enables you to experience the battle from a video monitor's safe remove - and in doing so begins to live up to its name.

Much of the level's impact comes from that blurry monochrome screen, which is covered with an indecipherable yet plausible-looking HUD, and filled with burning white points of body heat for you to target. After years of news reports filled with footage from real-life wars, it is an eerily familiar image, and one that can be rendered perfectly by Infinity Ward's engine. If the rest of Modern Warfare looks like a video game, Death From Above looks queasily real. Or, inversely, it makes you realise that taking lives from the comfort of a cockpit and using a flickering monitor can look weirdly like playing a video game.

"Good kill, good kill," chirps the AC-130's pilot as you annihilate small crowds of Russian nationalists from on high. "We've got a runner here," the co-pilot mentions dryly as a straggler attempts to flee. Occasionally, there are flickers of emotion, with comments such as "Nice!" and "Nailed that guy..." Delivered with the enthusiasm of a fan cheering on their favourite football team, they're disturbing in their own way, but for the most part it's the complete lack of emotional engagement that makes the scene so uncomfortable. What makes it truly frightening, though, is the simple fact that Death From Above, on standard difficulties at least, is terrifically easy.

Framed as an escort mission (Soap and his squad progress through the level on foot, and must not be harmed), at no point during the level is the AC-130 under any direct threat. The enemy forces below

don't just look like ants from the plane, they might as well be ants for all the difference it would make to their ability to withstand your assault. The game introduces a few other fail states, too: you're obliged to avoid civilian vehicles on the main highway, and are repeatedly instructed not to shoot a church in the centre of the level - but these aren't difficult to fulfil. They're slightly absurd, in fact. You wreak so much destruction across the breadth of this small town that avoiding a single religious building is obviously a sop - and a scarily plausible one at that.



Did Infinity Ward understand the nature of the experience it was creating? In a game stuffed with hoorah jingoism, such an uncomfortable experience as being the AC-130's gunner feels out of place. COD 4 has a more obvious 'big' moment - the detonation of an atomic weapon that undercuts the heroics of the level in question. But Paul Jackson staggering out of his crashed chopper isn't a Kojima-esque commentary on the futility of war. It's a justification for it. Saddam might not have had weapons of mass destruction, Modern Warfare seems to say, but my bad guy does. By contrast, the AC-130 sequence makes you understand that the true horror of modern war is its dehumanising effect on those who wage it.

But for most players, their lasting impression of the AC-130 won't owe anything to Death From Above. It'll be its role as a killstreak reward in Modern Warfare 2 and 3. Get 11 kills (12 points in MW3) and for 40 seconds you can dominate the other team from the skies. It's a thrill, certainly, but a cheap one, and the squealing protests of the opposing team won't linger in the memory like the sight of a single figure, burning white with body heat, trying to escape your onslaught by running stupidly into a wide open field.



200

THINGS YOU NEED
TO KNOW ABOUT
TOTAL WAR: THREE
KINGDOMS



Creative Assembly senior designer Leif Walter and writer Pete Stewart walk you through Total War: Three Kingdoms.

Josh West

If you own a PC you should probably be playing Total War.

It's as simple as that; it doesn't matter whether you're a history buff looking to take command of some truly epic battles, or an inquisitive player eager to watch thousands of little soldiers smash into thousands of other little soldiers until your graphics card shatters into pieces. Total War is a strategy series that offers something for everybody; that's in spite of how imposing or complicated it may at first seem. That's why we've put this together, everything you need to know about Total War: Three Kingdoms.

Listen, we get it. This is a niche genre, one that requires more investment than your typical action-adventure, FPS or RPG. Maybe you caught a Let's Play on Twitch and became immeasurably terrified by the speed in which the game plays, and the way in which some players can orchestrate complex manoeuvres with thousands of troops under their command in seconds. Perhaps you tried a Total War at a friend's house one time only to switch it off minutes later as they erupted into fits of laughter, teasing you because you dared to pull the difficulty down to easy – some wounds never heal. And hey, maybe you watched a trailer and the scale of the campaign map and the size of the armies scared the living bejesus out of you. Look, everybody has their reasons for approaching the genre with caution, but we're here to tell you that if you've ever had even a passing interest in Total War that this is going to be the game to finally try it.

Three Kingdoms takes place in a fascinating period of history; it's a story bound by love and loss, driven by heroes and villains, resulting in some of the bloodiest conflicts known to humanity. Creative Assembly is leveraging all of this to build its latest and the results are certainly impressive. With a renewed focus on characters as a way of building tension and a more immersive campaign experience, we honestly believe that Three Kingdoms will be the perfect refresher after the fantasy excursions of Total War: Warhammer and spin-off sagas found in Britannia. This is a Total War experience that's going to surprise veteran players, though it's also going to be accessible enough that new players will find entertainment.

That's a difficult line to walk and that's why we've had senior game designer Leif Walter and writer Pete Stewart join us after a recent hands-on session to help walk you through everything you need to know about Total War: Three Kingdoms.



It's a long time coming

It's already been six long years since the release of Total War: Rome II. If you too have been eager to see Creative Assembly return to its historical roots after so many years of dealing in fantasy, then you'll want to pay attention to Total War: Three Kingdoms. The studio is breaking new ground here, ushering in huge revisions to its classic formula, drawing from its recent experiments and rich legacy in the genre to deliver a Total War that feels fresh and emboldened to usher in sweeping change. Three Kingdoms is pushing the series in a new direction, taking bold strides to deliver a Total War game that could quite easily surpass what we believed it was capable of.



A first for the series

Three Kingdoms is the first Total War game to be set in China, with the tactical action framed around what Creative Assembly describes as, "one of the most turbulent times in Chinese history." It's difficult to believe that it has taken this long for the studio to get here; China is unquestionably one of the most requested locations for the studio to settle on, offering an aesthetically diverse array of battlegrounds, a roster of rich, historical characters to become acquainted with, and a host of well-storied conflicts that can be easily leveraged for Total War's typically large-scale battles. It is, as lead writer Pete Stewart told us, "sort of the perfect Total War setting."



What's in a location?

Three Kingdoms picks up in 190 CE, just as the notorious Han Dynasty is on the verge of collapse. Senior game designer Leif Walter describes it to us as a "very exciting period in history, where this long-lasting dynasty of almost 400 years is crumbling. And then, in the ashes of it, you basically have all of these new warlords emerging," he says, talking about the 11 different characters you have the opportunity to take command of across the campaign and in multiplayer. "It just made for a perfect sort of battleground for a Total War game." In the Three Kingdoms campaign you have the opportunity to fill the void of power quickly emerging, forged in the fires of conquest as other powerful warlords plan their own ascent to regional dominance.

17

Drawing from a mixture of sources

It might, on the surface, feel as if Creative Assembly is asking for trouble with Three Kingdoms, its story taking influence from both historical record and a work of fiction to inform its action. But Walter maintains that this actually gives the studio the flexibility to deliver a truly epic Total War game. "We have these two amazing sources to draw from. We have the historical account, which is very factual, and then we have Romance of the Three Kingdoms, the novel where all of these personal stories of bravado, revenge and friendship are all tied together into a nice narrative. It's not like Three Kingdoms is pure fiction, it's historical fiction and we certainly spent a lot of time making sure that anything from the novel is presented authentically," says Walter, with Stewart adding: "The novel mostly follows the facts, it just kind of embellishes them in a nice romantic way."

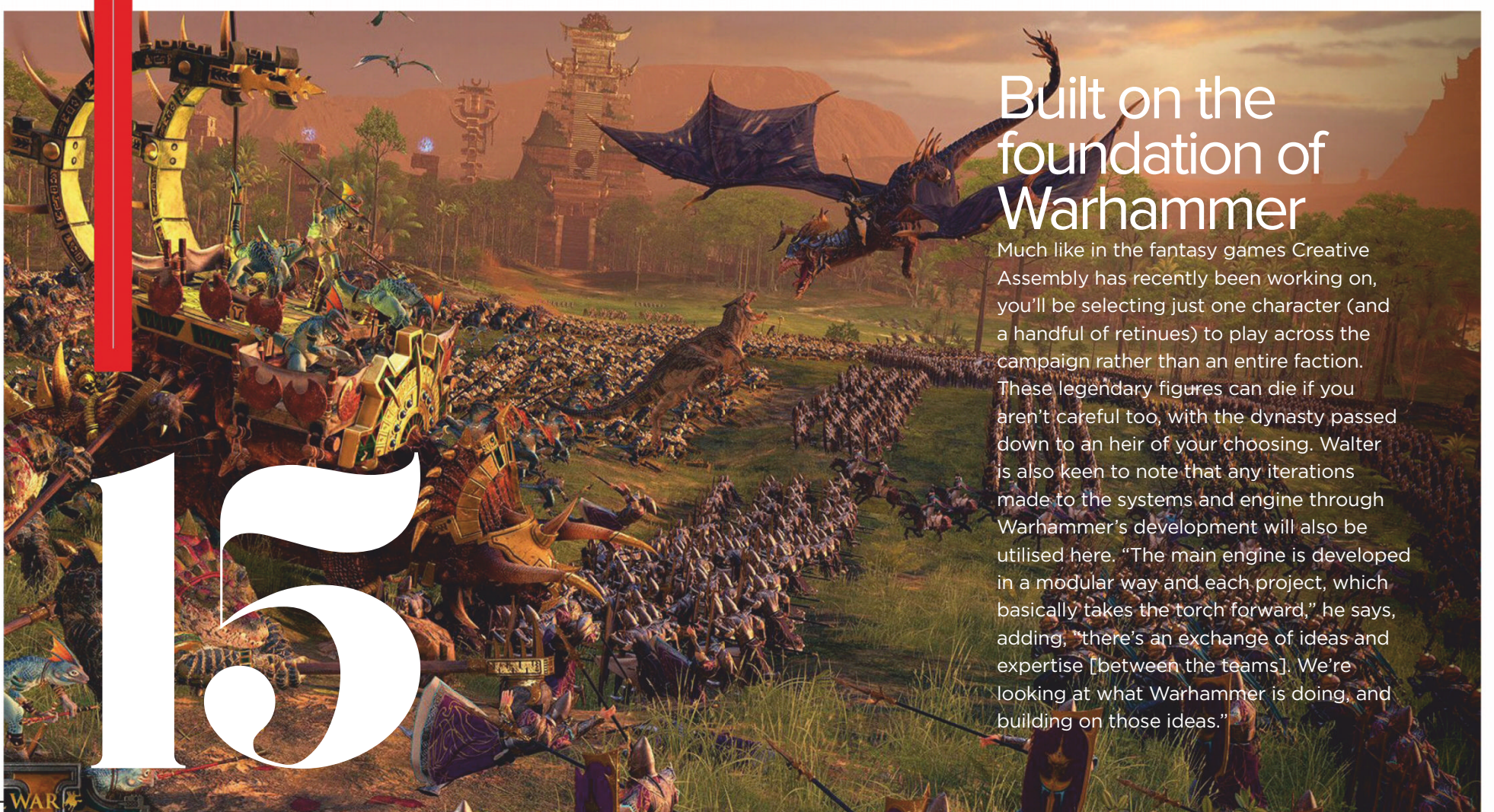
NEW
Romance
of The Three Kingdoms



16

It's all about the characters

The focus is wholeheartedly on character as a driving force for the action. The large-scale, real-time combat and turn-based tactical strategy that the series is famed for is still in place, but now all of that is driven through unique personalities and the relationships that they force along the way. It's been a challenge for Creative Assembly to find the right balance between these elements. "In a way, this is the first Total War title that is focused on very strong characters. We've had previous titles, like Attila and Napoleon - that have taken on a character's defining moment in history - but Three Kingdoms is trying to bring multiple characters to life," Stewart considers. "This whole period isn't defined by one person; they are all competing to



15

Built on the foundation of Warhammer

Much like in the fantasy games Creative Assembly has recently been working on, you'll be selecting just one character (and a handful of retainers) to play across the campaign rather than an entire faction. These legendary figures can die if you aren't careful too, with the dynasty passed down to an heir of your choosing. Walter is also keen to note that any iterations made to the systems and engine through Warhammer's development will also be utilised here. "The main engine is developed in a modular way and each project, which basically takes the torch forward," he says, adding, "there's an exchange of ideas and expertise [between the teams]. We're looking at what Warhammer is doing, and building on those ideas."



14

Social dynamics are always at play

As you enter a battle you'll be able to bring up to three hero units with you. This doesn't just give you more options on the battlefield but will directly determine what types of units you'll be able to field. However, you need to be wary of the social dynamics at play; all of the hero units won't necessarily play nicely together and that can have consequences that spill out of the real-time battles and into the turn-based tactics across the campaign map.



The return of unit formations

Each of the generals that are available to you in Three Kingdoms are trained in the art of war and will bring their own specialities and tactical knowledge to your army.

Creative Assembly is reflecting this in a very real way here, putting more work than ever into unit formations and glorious, glorious micro-management. Unlike the Total War: Warhammer games, unit formations are indeed returning to give an extra layer of tactical veracity to the gameplay, although these will need to be learned - passed down from the generals to the soldiers.

The better you integrate the various hero characters into your army, then the better prepared for battle across the campaign they will soon become.



You've got to have class

Each of the 11 characters available falls into one of five distinct character classes – Commander, Champion, Sentinel, Strategist and Vanguard. Each of these effectively offers a different playstyle and therefore a different way to tackle Total War. You'll need to utilise tactics that better suit your chosen general, keeping an eye out for unique items and mounts to make them even more powerful. Each commander has their own skill tree, letting you advance five active and five passive abilities to better shape their versatility in the field as you see fit. This will have a huge impact in the Romance campaign, where generals can be the difference between a win and a loss, though their power is mitigated in the traditional Historic campaign.



Romance is a new way to play

"You can't really tell the historical story of the period without the personal stories from the novel as well. The character relationships are important in both game modes, it's important to the historical background," Walter told us and – wait, two game modes? That's right, Three Kingdoms features two primary ways to play, Romance and Classical. Romance is where fact and fiction collide, as Creative Assembly looks to draw on the larger-than-life presence of the heroes that dominated the stories – their myth and legend shaping the way they impact the battlefield. "In Romance mode you get to know the characters," says Walter. "They will have a big impact, whereas in Historical/Classic mode it's more grand-scale – the focus is on big armies and manoeuvring your forces."



You can strip it back if you want to

It's worth noting that while a lot of the focus – particularly when it comes to the ways in which Creative Assembly demos the game – has been on the Romance mode, the studio is keen to stress that Classic mode is still the Total War game that you veteran players know and love. There's still a lot of time, care and attention going into this core way to play the game. If anything, it puts more attention and focus on some of the minutiae. For example, the artificial intelligence has been overhauled, requiring a clear attention to detail and sharp reactions to fend off encroaching armies; the engine can now render out thousands of authentically designed warriors onscreen at once and there's a day/night cycle that changes the composition of battles.

9

It's still the Total War you know

In spite of all of these big sweeping changes to the core dynamic, Classic mode will still be the Total War you know and love. You won't be able to rattle through dozens of enemies at a time, nor will they be as impervious to damage from regular units as they are in the Romance offering – in fact, generals will come with bodyguards in the Classic configuration to better depict how these characters were treated at the time. Elements of Three Kingdoms such as random events, the appearance of certain characters and the implementation of broader elements from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms novel won't appear in a Classic campaign. If you want your campaign to be pure, the option is certainly there for it.





Character is still key in historical mode

While you'll see characters effectively able to take on entire armies by themselves in Romance mode, the generals will be more tempered figures in the historical setup. That doesn't mean, however, that they are to be ignored entirely. In fact, managing the generals and dealing with their relationships, the drama and the betrayal that helped define that era of conflict is still going to be a huge appeal to the campaign. "These character relationships influence other game systems. They create a lot of interesting challenges and sort of spawn interesting decision-making that you will have to do," says Burrows. "It's less about juggling positives and negatives or doing spreadsheets of calculations, but rather about being a really strong leader."



You can duel other heroes to the death

Given the mythical nature of these generals and the power they can have over the turn of battle in Romance mode, you'll be happy to know that there are ways to take rival generals out of play. It's a risky manoeuvre, putting your own hero at risk, but it can so often turn the entire tide of a battle. You can challenge a rival on the battlefield to a duel as the battle rages on around them. The two characters meet and immediately engage in a fight to the death that is a real spectacle to watch in action. You'll also be able to activate abilities in the fight to try and help your hero out, though its win conditions are ultimately a blur of class, experience and morale; kill a hero's brother, for example, and you should expect to see them launch into a near-unstoppable, grief-fuelled



You can't trust anybody

This period of history came to be defined by bloodshed and betrayal. Total War has the former, with its ridiculous battles that pit tens of thousands of soldiers against one another in active combat. But it now has the latter too, introducing a system that allows you to implant operatives within enemy armies to bring them down from the inside - though the same can also happen to you too. "You've got to constantly wrestle with the idea that someone in your faction might be a spy," teases Stewart, who told us that players will need to pay careful attention to who they are promoting in their ranks. "There's an element of difficulty and challenge in that system, especially as you keep progressing through the campaign. It's one of the big things to be excited about, it makes the characters feel like they are part of a world."



Great entry point for new players

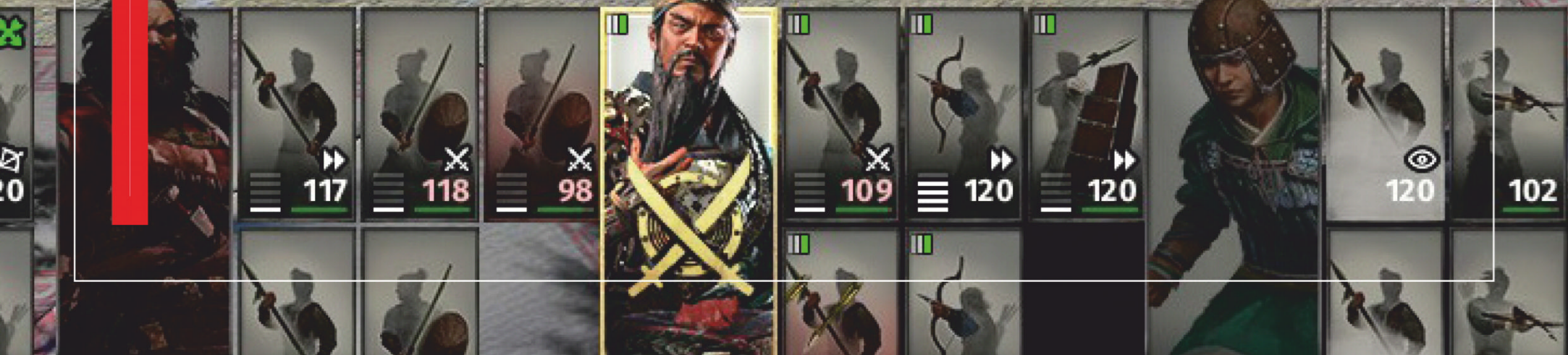
Of all of the Total War games that have arrived in the last 19 years, there's an argument to be made that Three Kingdoms is going to perhaps be the best entry point for genre newcomers that the series has ever seen. That, we're told, is an intentional decision on Creative Assembly's part - it's concerned about how easily new players can become involved with the fun. "I think often Total War is seen as this very strategic, half-historical simulation... but it is very much a personal game about characters - that's especially true of Three Kingdoms," muses Burrows, who notes that while a lot of work has been done to gradually introduce the systems and to scale the difficulty in a more effective manner, all of it is driven through those heroes.

4

How the difficulty scale works

Creative Assembly knows that its games can look overly complex and imposing on the surface. It too is aware of how difficult they could be to play, particularly for new players. The focus this time around has been on reworking the opening hours of the campaign – especially in Romance mode – to better bring players of all experience into the fold. “With some of the older games we had this problem where the difficulty curve is biggest at the beginning,” laughs Walter, who acknowledges that this is akin to throwing you into a burning building before teaching you how to fight the fire. “For Three Kingdoms we tried to push more towards an experience where you start in an easier environment. We want you to get to the more difficult bits organically, without forcing you to sit through tutorials. It should be an organic experience.”

DUEL





Exploring the fun of Total War

"This is something we keep exploring and looking into, because as much fun as the Total War games are and as great as they are, they can be large, multifaceted beasts," laughs Stewart, maintaining that if there were to be a good kind of beast, Total War would be it. But Stewart, a veteran of Creative Assembly, knows only too well what challenges the studio faces when trying to make the game more accessible to new players. That's something it is trying to change in Three Kingdoms. "What we have focused on is that when you first start playing, if you don't particularly have a lot of experience, is we wanna sort of help you to get used to the systems slowly, so by the time you're 20, 30 turns down the line, you'll actually understand what's happening in the game," he says, although we wonder aloud what a player should do if they are still struggling at that point... "Just turn the difficulty down,

It feels fantastic

Whether you love the idea of this being such a character-driven game or are approaching it with caution, you're going to fall pretty hard for Three Kingdoms – and it's already the biggest selling Total War game of all time. The battles feel suitably epic – stressful and invigorating in equal measure. The refined control systems feel excellent, making it comfortable for us to direct large forces across the battlefield and quickly re-organise when it all goes horribly wrong. The art direction is unlike anything you've ever seen from the series; it's beautiful to behold. Creative Assembly has not pulled any punches as it returns to the historical core of Total War.





1

It's left us eager for more

Total War titles have always gotten bigger over time. More DLC, more campaigns and factions, more ways to play, and mods that provide subtle historical makeovers to massive player-driven efforts to create entirely new worlds to fight over. And Total War: Three Kingdoms will be no different. We're already in love with this game, and we can't wait to see what's coming down the road in the game's future.



THE BEST TOTAL WAR GAMES

The definitive war of the worlds.

Matt Elliot

Judging the best Total War games is tricky. Maybe it's because the concept of 'best' depends on what kind of mood you're in – I play them on rotation, influenced by whichever books, films, or other games I'm consuming at the time. Watching the Battle of the Hornburg makes me crave Total War: Warhammer; reading about the crusades make me yearn for Medieval 2. These are 'feel' games, which satisfy cravings beyond the need for sharp strategy or pitched battles. They let you twist history, create new stories, or roleplay as your favourite generals.

There's also precious little to separate them, especially at the top end of the order. The factors that make the series a success are found in every game, and it's often only the strength of the setting that sets the games apart. There are obvious outliers – Empire and Napoleon feel like they're from a different universe – but they all offer the same mix of conflict and conquest, failure and domination.

In order of preference, here are the best standalone Total War games.



10

Rome 2

It says loads about Total War that the lowest entry on this list isn't a poor game – it's just not as good as people hoped. The still-excellent original set a high bar, but that wasn't the only issue: Rome 2 had a flawed launch and played like an uneasy transition to a more advanced system. Because of that, it's a harder game to love. Truthfully, the game's reputation is a little unfair – the numerous bugs and wobbly AI have been patched, and when it works, it's as deep and rewarding as any other Total War. It also has an amazing selection of unique factions, making this feel like one of the richest entries in the series, if not the most revered.



9

Medieval

There's still loads to love about Medieval, but much of it has been refined and improved in the sequels. It bravely expands the scope of the, adding elements such as loyalty, religion and espionage, and because of this it feels like a deft representation of the brutal, tumultuous setting. It's also the game that really nailed the 'feel' of Total War's battle system – gleaming armour, lines of armoured troops smashing into each other, rousing music and improved graphics. It obviously looks simplistic when compared to the recent games, but the impact at the time can't be underestimated. Shogun started it all and Rome refined it, but Medieval expanded the series in a way that belies the simple presentation.



8

Shogun

Like the first Medieval game, Shogun isn't low on this list because it's poor, but because it feels like a thing from a different era. It also suffers from a sequel that stands out as one of the most dramatic and compelling entries in the series. But despite this, the original Total War game has moments that linger in the mind years after you first played it – things like charging into ranks of spearmen with a Kensai sword saint, or the desperate crackle of doomed musketeers resisting a cavalry charge. If you want to play a Total War game set in feudal Japan you're far more likely to play the sequel, but this is worth playing for posterity – a beautiful, stirring snapshot of the series that followed.



7

Empire

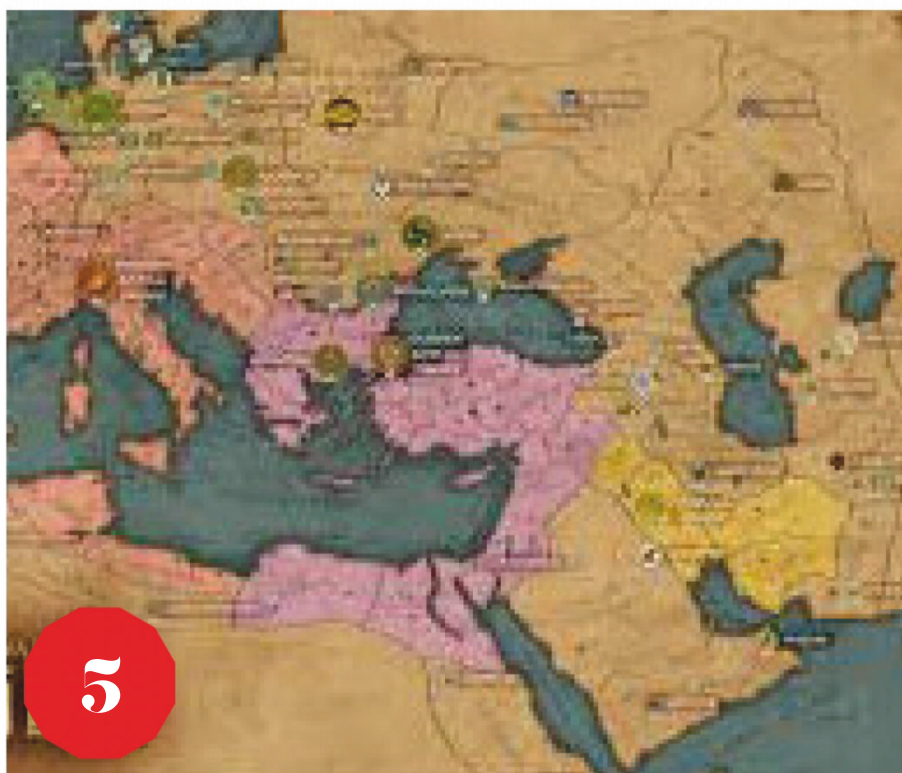
There was so much that could have gone wrong with Empire – the shift away from melee units, the flimsiness of ranked rifle fire, the specificity of naval conflict – but it did an admirable job of integrating systems that were alien to a game previously about hammering conflict and cavalry charges. It took until Napoleon for those creases to be ironed out. The AI is weak and the scale and scope can be troubling for anyone stepping up from Medieval 2, but it's still an incredible achievement. It embraces concepts that would be impossible in earlier games, and the technology trees have a much more direct effect on the game (plus there's something hopeful about the abolition of slavery being the ultimate expression of enlightenment). The battles lack the muscular impact of melee-focused Total War games, but the sound of cannon roaring on a crowded battlefield is still exhilarating. And one final, very minor thing: the theme tune from the main menu is incredible.

“
THE GAME IS A
TESTAMENT TO
BONAPARTE’S
BRILLIANCE

6

Napoleon

Napoleon takes everything Empire did well and refines it, streamlining and improving the best bits of its sprawling, often flabby predecessor. But it's more than just a mere improvement: Napoleon represents Creative Assembly learning how to properly apply a story to an emergent game. The game is a testament to Bonaparte's brilliance, and the conquests are essential because they're conducted with humanity and impartiality. As well as being a superb Total War game, it's a fascinating way of delving into a turning point in Europe. You get to experience the triumphs and failures of an incredible military mind, and it's an unusual, often moving way of seeing something that still echoes through history. Experiencing huge conflict through the eyes of a few people makes this a humbling, brilliant, utterly essential experience.



Attila

The most characterful moments from classic Total War games usually happen organically – the brave mercenary army on the edge of your empire, the feckless offspring of crusading generals. Attila is the first successful attempt to weave these stories into the game itself. It almost makes Total War a misnomer. It's not just about fighting: Attila is game of politics, feasting, famine, desolation, and migration, set during one of the most fragile and fascinating periods of history – Europe still feels like a unformed concept, ready to be shaped or smashed as you see fit. It also does a great job of folding in more complicated elements, such as weather and guerilla warfare – perfect for anyone more used to the simple clarity of earlier Total Wars. And like Warhammer, everything you do is under the shadow of a gathering storm: it's not if Attila and his Hunnic army will arrive, but when. A brutal, unforgiving and wonderfully complex strategy Total War game.



Rome

Rome was the first game where the scale of the conflict completely overwhelmed me. I'd pause every elephant charge to enjoy the impact; chase down every last fleeing slinger just to see them stampeded. It was also the first taste of what remains my favourite element of the series: the specific conflicts that appear in every game, when you and a rival faction push at each other's borders until the dam breaks and you flood into their land. It helps that the setting is familiar to anyone who's studied history (or read Asterix). It's immediately and deeply satisfying, and the only thing better than driving the Roman war machine across the Europe and beyond is defying history and withstanding it. Chuck in the savagely unforgiving Barbarian Invasion – the only Total War game that forced me to become a Roman vassal – and you have the best example of this time period in the series.

||
**PLAY AS EGYPT
 AND YOU'LL REALISE
 HOW SHITTY IT IS WHEN
 BARBARIC CHRISTIANS
 CALL CRUSADES
 AGAINST YOU FOR
 NO REASON**

3

Medieval 2


Medieval 2 owes an unquestionable debt to the games that came before it, but it has something magical that sets it apart from its predecessors. It's an exemplary setting for a Total War game – a time of conquest, crusades, and corruption, with enough stability to make each faction relatable and emboldening opportunities for expansion and invasion. Your place in the world makes every game unique. Play as England and the temptation to reach out and crush your neighbours is irresistible; play as Egypt and you'll realise how shitty it is when barbaric Christians call crusades against you for no reason. In Kingdoms, it also has a fantastic expansion that focusses on historical flashpoints and adds nuance and detail to the sweeping conquests of the main game. The AI can be soft at times, but it's still a vicious challenge when the Mongols turn up. And if it's still too easy for you, an amazing selection of mods breathe extra life into an already comprehensive game: Stainless Steel and Broken Crescent are both still essential today.

2

Total War: Warhammer 2

The sequel manages to surpass Total War: Warhammer with its smart vortex campaign and inventive factions.

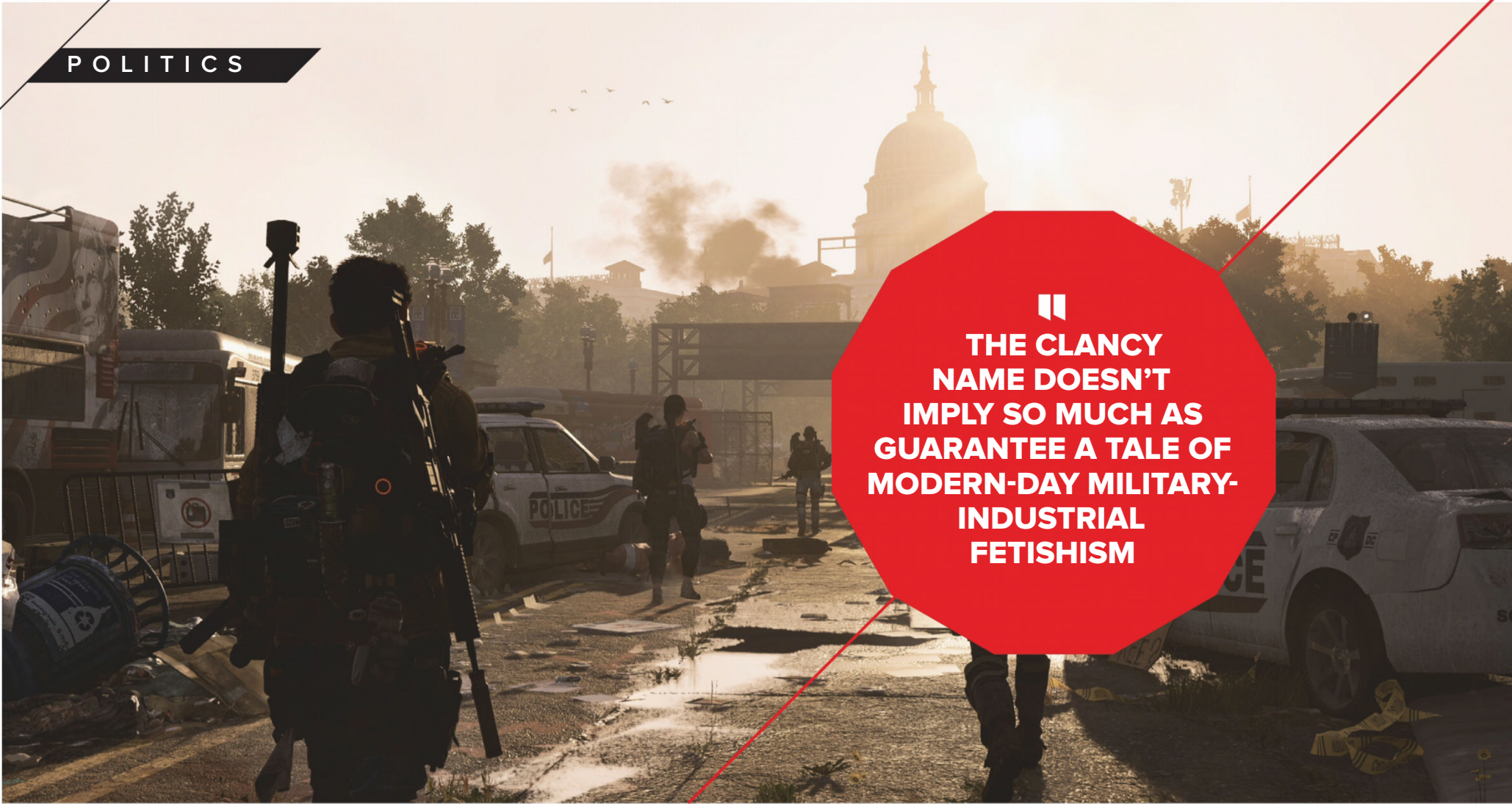
The high elf forces are the most conventional, but even they get dragons and magic. The lizardmen have the most colourful forces of the series so far, and the skaven are a brilliantly sneaky faction who bring up reinforcements from underground. The map design tends towards more interesting campaigns than the large continent of Total War: Warhammer 1. Dinosaurs vs. rats vs. elves vs. bad elves, what's not to love? Bespoke add-on campaigns like the excellent Curse of the Vampire Coast have only made the game feel deeper and more creative than it did at launch.



||
**THE AI HAS
LEARNED HOW
TO USE BOATS
AND EXPANDS
AGGRESSIVELY**

1 Shogun 2

There are other games on this list with more units, greater scope, and grander settings, but Shogun 2 is Creative Assembly at its cohesive best. Globetrotting conquest is replaced by a frenzied struggle to unify Japan, but it never feels small. Instead, the narrow focus makes Shogun 2 a rich, wholly immersive experience, with a superb campaign in one of the most evocative periods in the series. It also fixes many traditional Total War problems. The AI has learned how to use boats and expands aggressively on higher difficulty levels. Clans feel distinct. And, best of all, The Shogun can declare you an enemy if you get too powerful, preventing you from sweeping to victory - instead of rolling over factions one-by-one, you have to protect the resources you've spent time compiling. It's also magnificently designed, meaning that new players can easily adopt its systems while Total War vets can sit back and let this beautiful, brilliantly-plotted game deliver all the moments that make us love the series.



||
**THE CLANCY
 NAME DOESN'T
 IMPLY SO MUCH AS
 GUARANTEE A TALE OF
 MODERN-DAY MILITARY-
 INDUSTRIAL
 FETISHISM**

UBISOFT SAYS ITS GAMES AREN'T POLITICAL – BUT WHEN VIEWED THROUGH A SNIPER SCOPE, WHAT ISN'T?

The Division 2 is the latest in a long line of the developer trying to have its cake and eat it too.

FAR CRY 5 WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE POLITICAL, THE GAME'S STORY AND SETTING NAILED DOWN LONG BEFORE THE PHRASE 'TRUMP COUNTRY' HAD ANY MEANING. THAT'S WHAT UBISOFT WOULD PREFER YOU TO BELIEVE, AT LEAST. EVEN BEFORE GLOBALISM WAS YANKED INTO ITS ONGOING EXISTENTIAL CULTURE WAR, THE US HAD ITS POLITICAL DARK SIDE, AND SO FAR CRY 5 – A TALE OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISTS, CONSPIRACY THEORISTS AND GUN NUTS – HAD POLITICAL COMMENTARY BAKED HARD INTO ITS THEMATIC CODEBASE. THE DIVISION 2 FOLLOWS A SIMILAR PATTERN: IT IS AN INESCAPABLY POLITICAL WORK THAT, WHETHER BY ACCIDENT OR DESIGN, TAKES ON EXTRA LAYERS OF MEANING GIVEN THE CURRENT STATE OF THE WORLD INTO WHICH IT HAS RELEASED.

With these two games in particular, we see a Ubisoft trying to have its cake and eat it, presenting just-about-plausible alternate timelines for modern-day America, then insisting it's not trying to actually say anything about the real world. And then, even worse, carrying through on that promise by shipping games with such vapid narratives. In *The Division 2*'s case, the Clancy name doesn't imply so

much as guarantee a tale of modern-day military-industrial fetishism; and if we're being unkind, it also suggests the story is not exactly going to be one for the ages. So, in both cases, does it prove.

Yet Ubisoft's position on all this is, to a degree, an understandable one. All art is political, sure, but videogames are products as well as works of art. They need to be sold, and will not sell as well if they appear to thematically alienate people who identify with the 'wrong' political viewpoint. And as Ubisoft management has pointed out before, it is hard for a game made in the publisher's global structure to present a unified political view: when 2,000 people have worked on a game at studios across the globe, it is enormously unlikely that all of them will hold the same views.

In any case, does it really matter? It is hard to imagine what either game could meaningfully tell us about the real world, especially given that their language is one of violence and the binary split between good and bad. In a way *The Division 2*, like *Far Cry 5*, makes the only political statement it needs to when it puts you on one particular side, immediately casting you and those around you as the good guys. Anyone who bats, or snipes, for the other team is cannon fodder, and fair game. Ubisoft can say what it likes about its ultimate intentions, but it picks a side for you in *The Division 2* as soon as you

pitch up at the White House and your avatar holsters their weapon.

Moreover, if you find the publisher's current shooter politics distasteful, consider the alternatives. *The Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* era tales of ultra-violent derring-do against Islamic fundamentalists belongs to the past. Cold-War Soviets feel similarly played out (and would arguably be a bit too on the nose in a game right now). Gaming has had its fill of Nazi antagonists many times over, and while Bethesda drew acclaim for openly marketing *Wolfenstein 2: The New Colossus* as a game that let you punch Nazis, it is a very different sort of game to *The Division*; it's a work of fantasy whose last thematic contact with reality was over 70 years ago. *The New Colossus* is, if anything, a less political game even than those on Ubisoft's slate.

Which, really, is the point. *The Division 2*, like *Far Cry 5* before it, is damned not by its actual politics, but its professed lack of them. The issue is not what got made – though we'd dearly love whatever comes next to have a story worth sticking with – but what was said about it by the senior developers tasked with getting through another round of press interviews without another round of controversy. Politics is just another word for marketing, in other words. If you pretend to be something you're not, when the truth comes out, you risk losing by a landslide.



Power up your gaming with Samsung Portable SSD T5

PUTTING SPEEDY GAMING WITHIN EASY REACH

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If there's one thing that continues to irk gamers, it's the constant need to manage storage space for games. As games become more complex and graphically detailed, they're taking up more and more drive space, meaning a constant need to delete and re-download games. Thankfully, there's an easy way to avoid this - with the growing convenience and affordability of Samsung Portable SSD T5 range, it's now simple to have your collection on hand, installed and ready to go.

Convenience is actually just the tip of the iceberg. There are numerous benefits to using a solid state drive (SSD) over a traditional, mechanical hard drive.

LESS WAITING, MORE PLAYING

Unlike traditional hard drives, which read data from a spinning magnetic disk at transfer speeds determined by revolutions per minute (RPM), SSDs use super-speedy flash storage and feature no mechanical parts.

The result is that while mechanical hard drives typically max out at read and write speeds of 110MB/s, Samsung Portable SSD T5 can move data around at up to

540MB/s¹. That means installing your games to an SSD can significantly help reduce loading times. Testing from respected media outlets like Eurogamer has shown that installing console games to an external SSD can cut loading times in half.

STYLISH AND COMPACT DESIGN

Sporting a similar brushed-aluminum unibody design as its Portable SSD T3 predecessor, the T5 also maintains its forebear's compact size, and actually shaves off about a millimetre from the T3's width, coming in at 74 x 57.3 x 10.5 mm. It's also light, at just 51 grams. That small form-factor makes it ideal for use with PS4 or Xbox - you won't need to set aside a dedicated space in your entertainment unit to keep your games library on hand.

For style-conscious gamers, Samsung Portable SSD T5 also comes in four gorgeous colours, depending on the storage size you're after: the 250GB and 500GB models are available in blue, 1TB and 2TB models are

offered in deep black or 500GB and 1TB also come in the newly released rose gold and metallic red².

EASE OF USE

Setup on a console is straightforward. For example, when you plug the T5 into a PS4, you'll need to go the Settings menu on the console's home screen. From here, select the Devices menu, and inside that menu you'll need to choose the USB Storage Devices listing. Once you've done that, you'll simply need to select the

correct drive and then select 'Format as extended storage'. Once the drive is formatted, and once your games are downloaded and installed, you'll be able to launch and play them right from the SSD. The process is much the

same for the Xbox One.

If you need storage for your games, there are few options that can match Samsung Portable SSD T5 for speed, convenience and style.

Samsung's Portable SSD T5 range is now available in Australia at selected online stores and retail partners.



That small form-factor makes it ideal for use with both video game consoles and desktop PCs

THERE IS ONLY WAR

Considering delving into Warhammer 40K? Trying to work out where to start? Fear not, as this guide is for you.

Chris Comiskey



The best Warhammer 40K starter sets – indeed, all Warhammer 40K starter sets – start with a grim tone: “In the grim darkness of the future, there is only war”. Shiver. However, its bleakness is matched by its accuracy and it sticks in the memory. It’s memorable because it is dark and scene-setting; and it is accurate because its universe is filled with a high quantity of things, races and events that are almost perfectly conducive to war and suffering. For example: chaos-driven daemons that claw into reality; evil space elves that torture people for sustenance; and organisms akin to the worst kind of H.R. Giger-nightmares that invade and devour entire planets.

It has long been a rich and fascinating setting and universe, and it is full of different stories and lore, which makes for a consistently enjoyable tabletop game. This heightens the importance of getting the right, and best, Warhammer 40K starter set as you’ll want to hit the ground running, getting neither bogged down in detail, nor bored or underwhelmed by a slow start. But neither of those things will happen if you stick to this guide. It’ll have you set, putting you in good shape and ready to enjoy a whole new universe. If you think it might be intimidating, panic not, as tabletop gaming is a logical, bigger, next step in hands-on gaming from the best board games.

Such is its influence and reach, Warhammer 40K has got its hand in many pies, from books to movies and video games to card games.

But the current version of the original tabletop game remains enormously fun and popular, pulling in many, many thousands across the world. If you’re looking to get involved, or re-embrace a hobby from your past, this guide will have you covered in terms of where to start collecting an army, how to get the Warhammer 40K starter sets cheaper, and, of course, get playing straight away.



WARHAMMER 40K STARTER KITS

DARK IMPERIUM

Here you get 53 models, the rule books, and a fancy box to store them all in. But you're getting loads of extras for the asking price in Dark Imperium too, as well as plenty of Primaris Space Marines and Death Guard models. In terms of actual value, there's loads to love here. It's notable, because Games Workshop doesn't normally do discounts or sales, so you need to pack in as much as possible for a starter set. The plastic ruler is not greatly different to one you've probably already got, but everything else here is laudable, especially the dice and the quick-reference rules sheet.

Bonus items: 12 dice, printed rule sheet, hard cover rulebook, printed data sheets, plastic ruler.

KNOW NO FEAR

A smaller-scaled version of Dark Imperium, Know No Fear still includes some nice items for the money. It has a handful of Death Guard and Primaris Space Marine models (31 in total, broken down into 14 Space Marines and 17 Death

Guards), the box doubles as terrain in the form of an Imperial shrine, and there's a two-sided gaming surface with detailed artwork.

Bonus items: Six dice, printed rulebook (truncated), narrative/hobbyist booklet, plastic ruler, double-sided gaming mat, cardboard terrain.

FIRST STRIKE

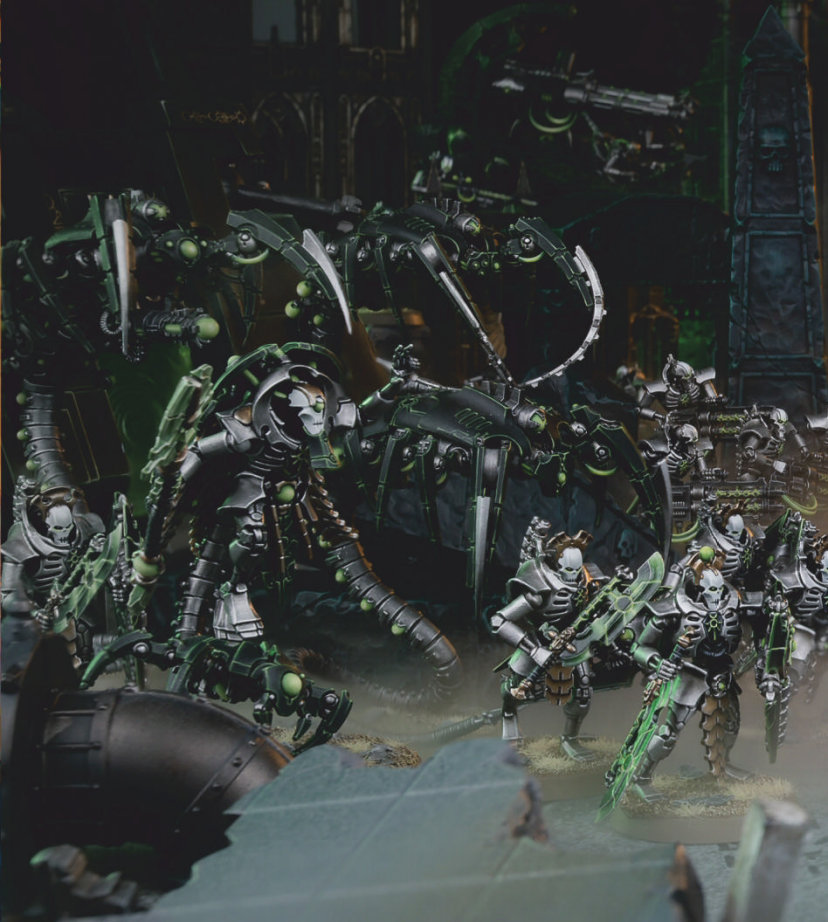
The Death Guard and Primaris Space Marine model count is slim, but there are enough to get some hands-on experience. The miniatures are snap-fit, so they don't require glue. The two-sided game mat is helpful, and one side of it has unit placement spots to help with your deployments.

Bonus items: Six dice, printed rulebook (truncated), narrative/hobbyist booklet, plastic ruler, double-sided gaming mat, cardboard terrain, printed data sheets.

WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED?

The rules: The basic rule set is 100% free. But what about that hefty tome you may have stumbled across? It's mostly stories,





pictures, and flavor text. It does contain some more advanced rules, but they're not required to start.

Dice: D6's are the lifeblood of any 40K game. 12 are acceptable, but you'll want at least 24, eventually. There are an irresponsible amount of dice to drool over at Chessex (www.chessex.com/) and Games Workshop stores.

Tape measure: Everything in 40K relies on measurements. You'll use your tape measure like a faithful side arm, unleashing its fury for unit movement, close combat charges, ranged weapons, and plenty more. Any tape measure will do.

A gaming surface: Most players buy a battle mat with printed graphics. They're fashioned from mouse-mat material, easily roll up for storage, and they're not too pricey. Check out Gamemat.eu, Front Line Gaming (www.frontlinegamingaustralia.com), and Gamematz (www.gamematz.com) for

some ideas.

Wound markers: Many 40K models have multiple wounds, and you need a reliable way to track how many are left. Anything is permissible here. The most common method is using multi-sided RPG dice, or tiny six-sided dice with different colors.

Terrain and scenery: Technically optional, if you're okay with fighting skirmishes on bland, flat, barren landscapes. Adding barricades, trees, ruins, and other items is the best way to avoid that. There are plenty of companies who sell pre-made kits, including Games Workshop, Gamemat.eu, The War Store, and Secret Weapon Miniatures.

Model tools and painting accessories: Warhammer models are simple to assemble, and they come with easy-to-follow instructions. If you've never painted before, check out the in-depth tutorials and tips of the day from Paint



Master General Duncan Rhodes on Twitter (twitter.com/WHTV_Dunc). MiniWarGaming and StrikingScorpion82 have excellent painting videos too. Alternatively, you can commission a painting company if you have the cash.

Brushes: at least three – a small layer brush, a medium layer brush, and a medium base coat brush. Stay away from bargain brands. They'll only betray you.

Acrylic model paints: colors depend entirely on your preferences. Vallejo and Formula P3 are stalwart alternatives to Games Workshop.

Cutters and a hobby knife: Games Workshop's versions are top-shelf quality, with premium prices. You can buy cheaper ones if you want.

Super glue and plastic glue: any brand is groovy.

POPULAR FACTIONS FOR BEGINNERS

For any army you collect, you'll need a codex to go with the models. Codices provide essential info, including data sheets and special rules for all your units, and often some interesting lore and background information too.

SPACE MARINES

Codex: Adeptus Astartes – Space Marines

Suggested starting kits: Start Collecting! Space Marines, Primaris Hellblasters, Thunderfire Cannon

Painting/modeling difficulty: Moderate

Price to expand: Significant

Overview: Hulking monks with guns. From a lore perspective, each Space Marine is seven feet tall, genetically modified, clad in power armor, and completely fearless. They have the most models out of any faction, and despite being elite foot soldiers, they somehow still have superior vehicles and tanks.

Why to play them: Because you like winning. Space Marines are the darling children of Games Workshop, so they always get the most updates, the newest models, the best rules, and the biggest codices.

Why not to play them: Everyone plays Space Marines. Even people who say they don't play Space Marines play Space Marines. If you're looking to stand out, go elsewhere.

AELDARI

Codex: Craftworlds

Suggested starting kits: Start Collecting! Craftworlds, Wave Serpent, Dire Avengers, Avatar of Khaine

Painting/modeling difficulty: Hard

Price to expand: Minimal

Overview: What if Legolas, but in space? That's the Aeldari, also known as Eldar and Asuryani. They're elegant and immortal, and they have the

most advanced technology in the 41st millennium. The Aeldari also enjoy a gamut of nasty psychic powers, which are 40K's version of spells. Despite their superiority in firepower and speed, the average Aeldari unit is fragile.

Why to play them: With certain Aeldari units aimed at the correct targets, your opponents will drown in their own tears. It takes skill and grace to field them, but it's immensely rewarding planning a well-laid trap.

Why not to play them: You're always outnumbered, and there's little room for error. You can toss around psychic powers with glee, but there's always the chance of Perils of the Warp – an unlucky dice roll that can potentially murder your caster.

ORKS

Codex: Orks

Suggested starting kits: Battlewagon, Meganobz, Ork Warboss Grukk's Boss Mob, Ork Tanksbustas, Ork Boyz, Ork Warbiker Mob

Painting/modeling difficulty: Easy

Price to expand: Moderate

Overview: The Ork philosophy is this: killing things. That's it. They worship two gods: Gork and Mork. Gork is brutal, but kunnin', and Mork is kunnin', but brutal. The Orks are rumored as the most psychically gifted race, though they don't realize it, or just don't care. For example, since Orks believe that red vehicles go faster, they actually do.

Why to play them: They're random and hilarious. Set your units in the direction of the opposition, and then charge them directly in. Laugh maniacally when an Ork slaughters a Space Marine Terminator at one eighth the points cost.

Why not to play them: It's common for your guns and mechanical contraptions to kill your own units. From a narrative angle, this is completely Orky. It's funny at first, but if you're focused on being competitive, Orks tend towards unreliable.

ASTRA MILITARUM

Codex: Astra Militarum

Suggested starting kits: Start Collecting! Astra Militarum, Cadian Defence Force, Basilisk, Manticore

Painting/modeling difficulty: Moderate

Price to expand: Extreme

Overview: Every human-colonized planet has to provide soldiers to the Astra Militarum (also known as the Imperial Guard). There are so many recruits, they're considered more expendable than ammunition. Tanks, artillery, rows of conscripts, hardened veterans, and sheer power through weight of numbers: this is the Astra Militarum's mantra.



TYRANIDS

Codex: Tyranids

Suggested starting kits: Start Collecting! Tyranids, Hormagaunt Brood, Termagant Brood, Genestealers

Painting/modeling difficulty: High

Price to expand: Extreme

Overview: The Tyranids are probably the weirdest life form going in the Warhammer 40K universe – and they’ve got the looks to prove it. Acting as an organic and grotesque horde in almost all ways, they travel through the universe identifying prey planets that they can strip of bio-matter from top to bottom, leaving behind only a stony husk of what was there before. They have strength in numbers and strangely-evolved organisms that know no fear or any other concept apart from conquer and devour.

Why to play them: You’ve got a fascination with the biologically odd, or are a big fan of H.R. Giger’s artwork. But seriously, if you want to lead an army that will literally (during the game) instil terror into your enemies and use a plethora of weird and wonderful alien bio-technology, but can also rip the face off someone in hand-to-hand combat, the Tyranids are for you.

Why not to play them: They are hand-to-hand focused so you’ll have to be canny against some enemies who do their biggest damage from range. As the word horde might indicate, there are plenty of bodies in a Tyranid army so they can be expensive to collect and to make a sizeable force with. Given their organic forms and curves, bumps and lumps they are particularly tricky to paint really well, too.

Why to play them: Deploy your units, insert tank shells and ordnance into your enemies’ nether regions, and use your infantry as human walls. Astra Militarum coined the phrase “leaf blower army,” in the sense that playing them is like starting up a leaf blower, pointing it at the tabletop, and blowing your opponent’s models off it.

Why not to play them: You won’t make friends playing this faction. They’re also a huge investment in your time and money, because there are so many models available, and they’re so cheap to roster.

T’AU EMPIRE

Codex: T’au Empire

Suggested starting kits: Start Collecting! T’au Empire, T’au Empire Pathfinder Team, T’au Empire Fire Warriors Strike Team

Painting/modeling difficulty: Moderate

Price to expand: High

Overview: The T’au are an optimistic Xenos race whose goal is to spread their ‘enlightenment’ throughout the universe. A seemingly intelligence-focused race who prefer to absorb planets and societies into their ranks by diplomacy, their technology is incredibly advanced and will help to coerce those who are reluctant to just agree. Each T’au soldier is like an individual Iron Man, displaying and deploying the latest technological advancements made by the race, often enhanced by scientific breakthroughs such as gravity fields, stealth fields or AI.

Why to play them: Because you’re a big fan of battlemechs, technological advancements and perhaps those that value intelligence over force (see also: direct opposite of Orcs). They’re very focused on high-powered weaponry so you can create quite a powerful army with not quite as much investment in money, time and effort.

Why not to play them: They do not fare well in close combat. At all. Ever. That excellence in firepower comes at a price and that is being very vulnerable up close and personal. The T’au also have zero psychic power among their number which can cause serious disadvantages against enemies that do have it. They are also not quite as mobile as other armies so this can also get you in trouble.

THE BEST OF THE REST

The factions highlighted above are just a paltry few, and you should feel free to explore the others. Check out Games Workshop’s YouTube channel for all the latest releases and info. If you don’t have any friends who play, take a visit to your local gaming store (Games Workshop branded or otherwise) to get some matches going.



F R O M

T H E

A S H L E S

Rebuild a broken world in **Phoenix Point**, a bold new sci-fi strategy game from the creator of the original X-COM.

Andy Kelly

*The permafrost has melted,
unleashing a terrifying alien virus.*

*An eerie mist rolls across
the planet, compelling people
to wander into the ocean, where
they emerge as hideous,
mutated monsters.*

*The world is a mess, and in
turn-based strategy game Phoenix
Point, it's your job to clean it up.*

WHEN THE GAME STARTS IN 2047, MOST OF HUMANITY HAS BEEN KILLED, ABDUCTED, OR TRANSFORMED INTO ALIEN MONSTROSITIES," SAYS LEAD DESIGNER JULIAN GOLLOP, WHO IS PERHAPS BEST KNOWN FOR CREATING THE ORIGINAL X-COM SERIES. "BUT THERE ARE A FEW ISOLATED GROUPS THAT HAVE MANAGED TO SURVIVE."

"The Phoenix Project organisation you're the leader of is very diminished," he says. "You're being attacked on all sides by various different powers. But out of the ashes of the devastation of the virus, which comes to be known as the Pandora virus, there comes a number of charismatic leaders who claim their factions will be able to rebuild the world and make it better."

Julian Gollop has been making strategy games for decades, from Laser Squad and Rebelstar Raiders in the '80s, to the legendary X-COM series in the '90s. That's the old X-COM, with a dash after the X, rather than Firaxis' recent (and equally superb) reboot, XCOM. But Phoenix Point seems to be bigger, grander, and more ambitious than anything he's done before, and I ask what inspired him to start the project.

"I wanted to pursue what I call my vision of a grand strategy game, which involves tactical turn-based battles as well as a wider strategic conflict," he says. "I love this multilevel, multiscale aspect to strategy games, which is heavily influenced by some of the board games I used to play when I was much younger. Before computer games existed, in fact.

"I also wanted to revisit some of the ideas I was developing in the original X-COM series. For example, in X-COM: Apocalypse there was this idea of a

living city with multiple factions that you had individual relationships with. This was something I wanted to explore a lot more."

DEAD RISING

Gollop also wanted to bring back the feeling of dread and tension that permeated the X-COM series—of never knowing what horror lies around the next corner, or if your squad will make it out alive. "That was very much a part of the tension and excitement of the tactical battles," he says. "In Phoenix Point, we have a mutation system that can generate hundreds of enemy variations, so you are never sure what you're going to be facing.

"I also wanted to bring some of the RPG elements from the original X-COM to Phoenix Point," Gollop continues. "That sense that you're creating and nurturing a squad and carefully building them up to a force that's going to save the world. We want the player to have to decide whether they're going to risk their best soldier in a battle, or save them for when things get tougher later."

While the core of the game will be its tense, deep, strategic combat, story is also an important factor. But it's more than just window dressing: It actively informs the flow of the game, and how you interact with the various parties in it: Be they friend, foe, or a bit of both.

"We've spent a lot of time building the world," says Gollop. "We've produced a number of short stories for [crowdfunding] backers, which have been well received and give the game a rich backstory. In the game, much of the story will be revealed through the research system — as it was, in fact, in X-COM. And there are the factions, who have different ideas about how to save the world."



|||
**YOU DO HAVE A
 LOT OF CHOICE IN
 WHAT BATTLES YOU
 PURSUE.**

New Jericho is a faction led by a powerful leader named Tobias West. He was, before the outbreak, the CEO of a major arms manufacturer and private mercenary group, and has created a militaristic society where soldiers have high status. If combat's your thing, side with them.

"Everybody is expected to serve in West's personal army, and their approach to the Pandora virus is that it has to be eliminated by eternal vigilance," says Gollop. "So they're very strict about killing infected people, and any trace of the infection they detect is dealt with without prejudice. Tobias West is firmly against any kind of corruption of the human genome."

CULT HIT

Very much opposed to New Jericho is the creepy, cultlike Disciples of Anu, a religious order which believes that an alien godlike figure has come to save the Earth in the form of the Pandora virus and its mutations.

"They think that if they embrace it, they'll evolve with it," says Gollop.

"They've developed a technology that lets them contain the virus so that anyone infected doesn't become completely alien, which they think will allow humanity to become better than itself. The downside is that a lot of these experiments fail, causing a lot of death and suffering. But people join them because their leader, the Exalted, is highly charismatic. She's a mutant herself and has these powers, showing people what they could become."

And then there's the Synedrion, a highly ecological, anarchistic alliance. They have a technology that allows them to repel the virus, and believe they can reclaim the land — even if the seas are still infected — and rebuild society. "They want a society built on freedom, democracy, and other ideals they think have been neglected by previous civilisations. They think trying to completely defeat the alien menace, like New Jericho is trying to do, is a futile task."

All three factions have their own agenda, technology, and solutions to the alien menace. And you, as an

SIDE BY SIDE

THE FACTIONS YOU'LL MEET IN PHOENIX POINT



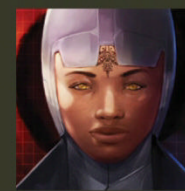
DISCIPLES OF ANU

A religious order which believes that weaponising the Pandora virus and its mutations is the key to rebuilding the world. The virus was, according to its scripture, retribution for humanity's sins.



NEW JERICO

A militaristic faction, New Jericho's goal is destroying the Pandora virus and reclaiming the planet. It believes in human purity, rejecting any form of mutation and restoring order through force.



SYNEDRION

This faction believes that, having learned from past sins, the world can now be rebuilt as a utopian society, with renewable energy, freedom from persecution and a focus on developing science and technology.

independent party, can use different, often risky methods to get this information. “You can ally with a faction, defending their settlements to curry favor,” says Gollop. “Or you can attack them and just steal their resources and technology.

“You can also trade and exchange research and technology peacefully. So that aspect of the game, including from a storytelling perspective, is a lot richer than X-COM. We also have plans for the story beyond even this first game, about what happens next in the world of Phoenix Point.”

The beliefs of the factions means you’ll be navigating dangerous diplomatic waters. “Your actions will have consequences and could lead to a faction turning on you,” says Gollop. “But if they’re under attack and you choose to intervene, they might trust you more. However, if you defend a Disciples of Anu base and not a Synedron one, because you’re more interested in forming an alliance with the former, the latter may react badly.”

You also have to consider the structure of each faction before you go charging in looking to make a deal. “With the Disciples of Anu, you can’t just march in and talk directly to the Exalted. You have to progress through several levels of their, let’s say, priest hierarchy to reach her. The Synedron are changing leadership a lot, as they’re having these internal debates, so you might talk to different people with different demands.”

And the faction you side with, if you decide to side with one, can also directly affect how you win the game. “Each faction has its own solution to the alien menace,” says Gollop. “They haven’t developed it at the start of the game, however, so you can choose to ally with one of them and work with them to achieve their goal. There’s also a fourth solution to the game besides siding with one of the three factions, which you can pursue without creating



This post-apocalyptic Earth is a grim place, but you can save it from total destruction.

any alliances, but it’s more difficult to pull off.”

The game’s tense turn-based combat will have you making equally interesting and important decisions, albeit on a smaller, more immediate scale. One of the most exciting features is how, thanks to the weird mutating properties of the Pandora virus, enemies are procedurally generated from dozens of different parts, and you’re never sure what it’s going to throw at you next.

“The alien mutation system works at a strategic level,” says Gollop. “For example, there are arthropod-type enemies with primitive claws and shields. But if you beat them a few times, and decisively, they’ll go through a mutation process. So next time you face them, they might be able to use human weapons, or develop different types of attacks such as poisons. And the more they defeat you, the more successful the mutation will be. This will require players to constantly change and adapt their combat tactics in battle.”

Another interesting feature is the free aim system. Similar to VATS in Fallout, this lets you target specific body parts of an enemy, opening up a realm of tactical possibilities. “This is important tactically because a lot of the aliens’ abilities stem from their various mutated body parts,” says Gollop. “If you have, say, a crab-type enemy with a shield and a gun, you can disable its arm to knock the gun out of its hand, which limits it to using a close-quarters shield bash. Some mutations have weak spots to deal extra damage, too. If you attack an enemy’s leg, it might stop it from moving as quickly.

“When you’re fighting a monster, the free aim system is more important than ever,” Gollop adds. “They’re like organic battleships with multiple weapon systems and you have to try and pick a strategy based on that. Do

you want to take its weapons out? Or focus on the most vulnerable part of its body? These things are all a very important part of your tactics in battle.”

PICK AND CHOOSE

Grand strategy games are obviously an influence on Phoenix Point, and I wonder if players who want to focus on that side of things can choose to automatically resolve battles. “You can’t automate battles, because they’re really the essence of what the game is all about,” says Gollop. “However, you do have a lot of choice in what battles you pursue. It’s a much more free-form mission system than you’d normally find in a game like this. You can instigate battles if a faction has something useful: an aircraft factory, say. You land your squad, fight the local defenders, and steal the aircraft. That’s your choice.”

And, in an example of things coming full circle, it’s clear in Phoenix Point’s slick animation and interface that Firaxis’ XCOM has inspired Gollop in some ways. “I love those games,” he says. “I really like the sense of drama they manage to get from a turn-based game. There’s some impressive 3D graphics and camera work in there. A nice interface too, which works smoothly with a mouse and keyboard or a controller. XCOM 2 in particular had great character customisation. They obviously streamlined a few things compared to the old X-COM games, most of which I think were good decisions. And they managed to reach a really wide audience with those games, too.”

It’s great to see Gollop return to the genre that made his name. Phoenix Point is set for release in June, and it’ll be interesting to see how it stacks up against Firaxis’ take on XCOM. The added layer of grand strategy — warring factions, diplomacy, espionage, and so on — will hopefully sit comfortably alongside the more granular, turn-based decision-making of a battle. With such a rich, storied history of making strategy games, from the ZX Spectrum to the present day, I reckon Gollop can pull it off.

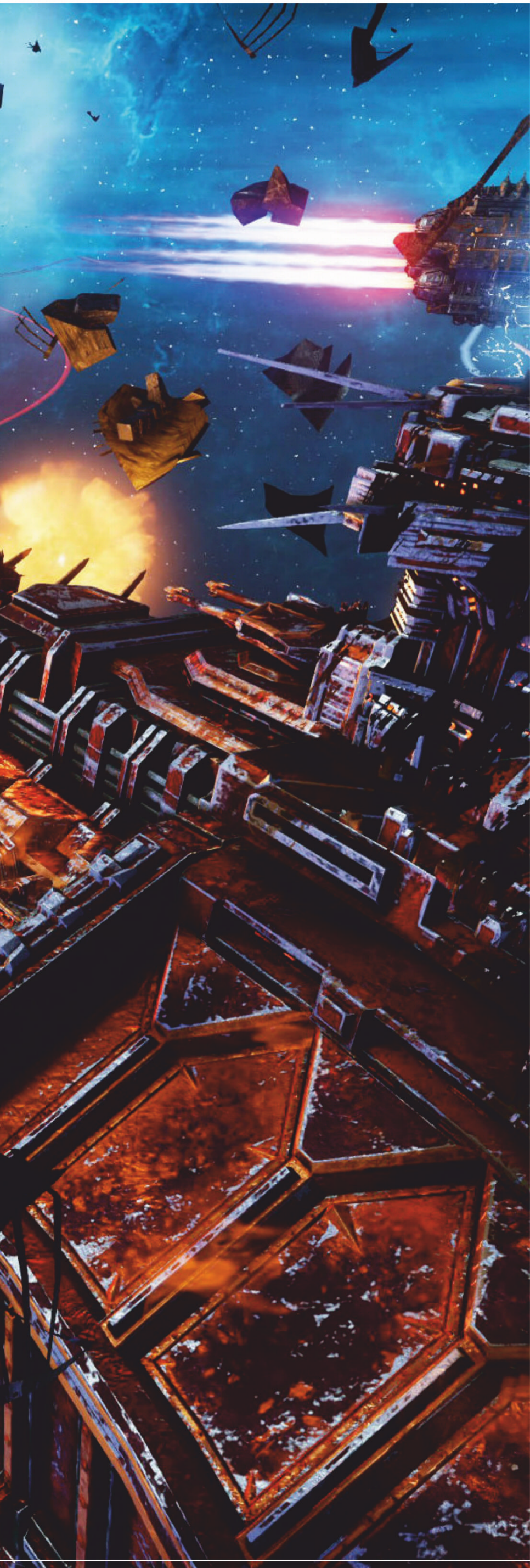


The mutation system means you never know what enemy will come at you

TOP TIER

THE 20 BEST STRATEGY GAMES ON PC

*From real-time classics to modern
turn-based favorites, these are the
best strategy games on PC.*

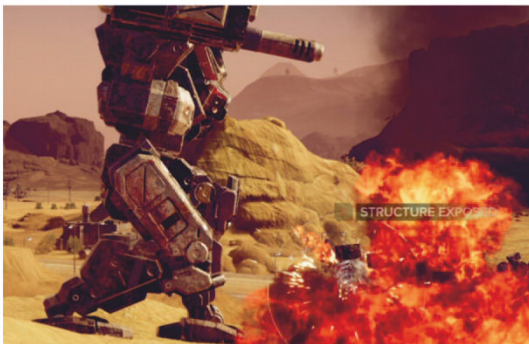


When it comes to the best strategy games, we look for a variety of elements. We like a mix between explosive, large-scale action and more complex games of difficult decisions. In this list, you'll find everything from fast-paced and competitive action games to long burn 4X games. In the case of series with multiple entries, we've picked what we feel was the best game to play now. We might feature more than one entry from the same series if we think they're different enough that you might benefit from playing both.



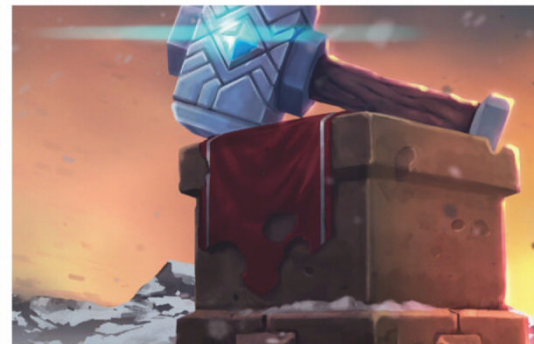
Battlefleet Gothic: Armada 2

Battlefleet Gothic: Armada 2's cosmic battles are spectacular. There's a trio of vaguely 4X-y campaigns following the three of the Warhammer 40K factions: The Imperium, Necron Empire and the nasty Tyranid Hives, but you can ignore them if you want and just dive into some messy skirmishes full of spiky space cathedrals colliding with giant, tentacle-covered leviathans. The real-time tactical combat manages to be thrilling even when you're commanding the most sluggish of armadas. You need to manage a whole fleet while broadside attacks pound your hulls, enemies start boarding and your own crews turn mutinous. And with all the tabletop factions present, you can experiment with countless fleet configurations and play with all sorts of weird weapons.



Battletech

Like an adaptation of the tabletop game crossed with the XCOM design template, BattleTech is a deep and complex turn-based game with an impressive campaign system. You control a group of mercenaries, trying to keep the books balanced and upgrading your suite of mechwarriors and battlemechs in the game's strategy layer. In battle, you target specific parts of enemy mechs, taking into account armor, angle, speed and the surrounding environment, then make difficult choices when the fight isn't going your way. It can initially be overwhelming and it's undeniably a dense game, but if that's what you want from your strategy games, or you love this universe, it's a great pick.



Northgard

Viking-themed RTS Northgard pays dues to Settlers and Age of Empires, but challenged us with its smart expansion systems that force you to plan your growth into new territories carefully. Weather is important too. You need to prepare for winter carefully, but if you tech up using 'lore' you might have better warm weather gear than your enemies, giving you a strategic advantage. Skip through the dull story, enjoy the well-designed campaign missions and then start the real fight in skirmish.

25% RESOURCES USED

ATTACK ORDER

Into the Breach

A beautifully designed, near-perfect slice of tactical mech action from the creators of FTL. Into the Breach challenges you to fend off waves of Vek monsters on eight-by-eight grids populated by tower blocks and a variety of sub objectives. Obviously you want to wipe out the Vek using mech-punches and artillery strikes, but much of the game is about using the impact of your blows to push enemies around the map and divert their attacks away from your precious buildings. Civilian buildings provide power, which serves as a health bar for your campaign. Every time a civilian building takes a hit, you're a step closer to losing the war. Once your power is depleted your team travels back through time to try and save the world again. It's challenging, bite-sized, and dynamic. As you unlock new types of mechs and mech upgrades you gain inventive new ways to toy with your enemies.

XCOM 2/War of the Chosen

The game cleverly uses scarcity of opportunity to force you into difficult dilemmas. At any one time you might have only six possible scan sites, while combat encounters are largely meted out by the game, but what you choose to do with this narrow range of options matters enormously. You need to recruit new rookies; you need an engineer to build a comms facility that will let you contact more territories; you need alien alloys to upgrade your weapons. You can't have all of these. You can probably only have one. In 1989 Sid Meier described games as "a series of interesting decisions." XCOM 2 is the purest expression of that ethos that Firaxis has yet produced. The War of the Chosen expansion brings even more welcome frantic changes, like the endlessly chatty titular enemies, memorable nemeses who pop up at different intervals during the campaign with random strengths and weaknesses. There are also new Advent troopers to contend with, tons more cosmetic options, zombie-like enemies who populate lost human cities, the ability to create propaganda posters and lots more. War of the Chosen does make each campaign a little bloated, but the changes are so meaningful and extensive that XCOM 2 players need to check it out regardless.



Total War: Warhammer 2

The first Total War: Warhammer showed that Games Workshop's fantasy universe was a perfect match for Creative Assembly's massive battles and impressively detailed units. The second game makes a whole host of improvements, in interface, tweaks to heroes, rogue armies that mix factions together and more. The game's four factions, Skaven, High Elves, Dark Elves and Lizardmen are all meaningfully different from one another, delving deeper into the odd corners of old Warhammer fantasy lore. If you're looking for a starting point with CA's Warhammer games, this is now the game to get – and if you already own the excellent original, too, the mortal empires campaign will unite both games into one giant map.



Homeworld: Deserts of Kharak

Homeworld: Deserts of Kharak sounded almost sacrilegious at first. Over a decade since the last Homeworld game, it was going to take a game remembered for its spaceships and 3D movement and turn it into a ground-based RTS with tanks? And it was a prequel? Yet in spite of all the ways this could have gone horribly wrong, Deserts of Kharak succeeds on almost every count. It's not only a terrific RTS that sets itself apart from the rest of the genre's recent games, but it's also an excellent Homeworld game that reinvents the series while also recapturing its magic.



Civilization 6

The Civ game of choice right now for us, and it's packed with enough features that it feels like it's already been through a few expansions. Its Districts system lets you build sprawling cities, and challenge you to think several turns ahead more than ever. The game is gorgeously presented – while the more cartoon-y style takes some time to get used to, it's lovely to look at in its own right. We're really curious to see how the inevitable expansions will build on what's already here, but taken as it is, this is the best Civ to play right now.



Stellaris

"I hope upcoming patches and expansions can fill in the gaps," is what one colleague said at launch. There's still room to improve for Paradox's sci-fi game, but the updates have been coming fast. The Utopia expansion made major changes to the game's internal politics system, and various other changes could plausibly see you put another hundred hours into the game. Plus, it lets you build Dyson spheres around a sun, letting you drain all the energy from it and leave any nearby planets freezing, which is amazing in a cruel way.



Endless Legend

A sleeper hit of recent years, Endless Legend is a 4X fantasy follow-up to Amplitude's Endless Space - a pretty good game, but apparently not the full measure of the studio's potential. Shadowed at the time of its release by the higher-profile launch of Civilization: Beyond Earth, Legend is easily the best game in the genre since Civ 4. It's deep and diverse, with fascinating asymmetrical factions, sub-races, hero units, quests to discover, and more. It looks gorgeous, too.



Neptune's Pride

As much a social experiment as a strategy game, Neptune's Pride pits friends against one another in a battle for control of a galaxy. The rules are simple: upgrade your stars and get them to build ships, then deploy them to poach more stars. The war unfolds slowly in realtime over the course of a week or so, and may slightly ruin your life during that period. The simple but elegant ruleset leaves lots of room to make and break alliances, and before you know it your friend's getting up at 3am to launch sneak attacks while you sleep. A simple game that orchestrates amazing drama.



C&C: Red Alert 2

I still love the first two Red Alerts, and most of Westwood's C&C entries are fantastic - but this one has the best campaigns, most interesting units, great maps and of course, superb FMV sequences. The different factions are so distinct, and have more personality than they did in the original game - hence Soviet squids and Allied dolphins. They found the right tonal balance between self-awareness and sincerity in the cutscenes, as well - they're played for laughs, but still entertain and engage.



Galactic Civilizations 2

If you've ever wanted to conquer space with an army of customisable doomships, this is the strategy game for you. It has smart, creative AI, and a full-size game can take weeks to complete. You have to balance economic, technological, diplomatic, cultural and military power to forge alliances, fight wars and dominate the galaxy. Reminiscent of the Civilization games, but on a much grander scale, and with a lot more depth in places.



Homeworld

Mechanically, Homeworld is a phenomenal three-dimensional strategy game, among the first to successfully detach the RTS from a single plane. It's more than that, though: it's a major victory for atmosphere and sound design, whether that's Adagio for Strings playing over the haunting opening missions or the beat of drums as ships engage in a multiplayer battle. If you liked the Battlestar Galactica reboot, you should play this.



Supreme Commander

Only Total War can compete with the scale of Supreme Commander's real-time battles. It's still exhilarating to flick the mousewheel and fly from an individual engineer to a map of the entire battlefield, then flick it again to dive down to give orders to another unit kilometres away. When armies do clash - in sprawling hundred-strong columns of robots - you're rewarded with the most glorious firefights a CPU can render. It's one of the few real-time strategy games to combine air, ground and naval combat into single encounters, but SupCom goes even further, with artillery, long-range nuclear ordnance and megalithic experimental bots.

StarCraft 2: Wings of Liberty

In addition to being the preeminent competitive strategy game of the last decade, StarCraft II deserves credit for rethinking how a traditional RTS campaign is structured. Heart of the Swarm is a good example of this, but the human-centric Wings of Liberty instalment is the place to start: an inventive adventure that mixes up the familiar formula at every stage. From zombie defence scenarios to planets that flood with lava every few minutes, you're forced to learn and relearn StarCraft's basic elements as you go.

TOP TIER



Warcraft 3

Most notable today for being the point of origin for the entire MOBA genre, Warcraft III is also an inventive, ambitious strategy game in its own right, which took the genre beyond anonymous little sprites and into the realm of cinematic fantasy. The pioneering inclusion of RPG elements in the form of heroes and neutral monsters adds a degree of unit-specific depth not present in its sci-fi stablemate, and the sprawling campaign delivers a fantasy story that – if not quite novel – is thorough and exciting in its execution. It also has the best ‘repeated unit click’ jokes in the business.



Rome: Total War

Total War’s transition to full 3D marks a point before the gradual escalation in complexity that would lead to Empire’s initial instability and the longstanding AI problems that have dogged the latter games in the series. The original Rome presents a simple, compelling image of ancient warfare and delivers on it phenomenally. It’s a great introduction to one of the most interesting eras in military history, and holds up to this day.



Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II

It was tempting to put the excellent first Dawn of War on the list, but the box-select, right-click to kill formula is well represented. Instead let’s appreciate the experimental sequel, which replaced huge units with a handful of rock-hard space bastards, each with a cluster of killer abilities. In combat you micromanage these empowered special forces, timing the flying attack of your Assault Marines and the sniping power of your Scouts with efficient heavy machine gun cover to undo the Ork hordes. The co-operative Last Stand mode is also intense.



Sins of a Solar Empire

Sins captures some of the scope of a 4X strategy game but makes it work within an RTS framework. This is a game about star-spanning empires that rise, stabilise and fall in the space of an afternoon: and, particularly, about the moment when the vast capital ships of those empires emerge from hyperspace above half-burning worlds. Diplomacy is an option too, of course, but also: giant spaceships. Play the Rebellion expansion to enlarge said spaceships to ridiculous proportions.



Crusader Kings II

Crusader Kings II is a political strategy game. It's as much about who your imbecilic niece is marrying as it is about leading armies into battle. Every landed character is simulated, and each one has goals and desires. It's complex - you can blame the feudal system for that - but offers clear and immediate drama on a personal level. Its simulation corners you into desperate situations and encourages you to do terrible things to retain power. One time I executed a newborn baby so that his older and smarter sister could reign instead. Feudal



DEFCON

DEFCON's sinister blue world map is the perfect stage for this Cold War horror story about the outbreak of nuclear war. First, you manage stockpiles, and position missile sites, nuclear submarines and countermeasures in preparation for armageddon. This organisation phase is an interesting strategic challenge in itself, but DEFCON is at its most effective when the missiles fly. Blooming blast sites are matched with casualty numbers as city after city experiences obliteration. Once the dust has settled, victory is a mere technicality. It's nightmarish, and quite brilliant in multiplayer.



Company of Heroes

Some games would try to step away from the emotional aspect of a war that happened in living memory. Not Company of Heroes. It's torrid and difficult and brutal. Sure, its methods are pure Hollywood - the muddy artillery plumes could have come straight from Saving Private Ryan - but the result is the most intense RTS ever made, brilliantly capturing the tactical standoff between WWII's asymmetrical forces.



Xenonauts

Its deep strategic systems and clean turn-based combat make Xenonauts a triumph of rebooted game design. If you're an old fan of the X-COM series, forget about finding your old install disks or putting up with 20-year-old graphics: playing Xenonauts is the best way to relive those glory days with deeper systems. And if you're new to X-COM, this game will let you explore the series' classic roots with added depth and details.



Rise of Nations

Age of Empires gave us the chance to encompass centuries of military progress in half-hour battles, but Rise of Nations does it better, and smartly introduces elements from turn-based strategy games like Civ. Instead of marshalling troops from a single base, you build cities all over the map to grow your nation's borders. When borders collide civs race through the ages and try to out-tech each other in a hidden war for influence, all while trying to deliver a knockout military blow with javelins and jets. There aren't enough games that let you crush longbowmen with amphibious tanks and stealth bombers.



Unity of Command

Strategy expert Tim Stone described this as a "fresh and friendly" wargame, praising the convincing, challenging AI. You'll need to use genuinely clever battlefield tactics to beat these computerised generals. The simple interface removes the usual barrier to entry that most wargames have, but there are hidden depths to uncover as you learn the intricacies of its systems.



Total War: Shogun 2

As Total War evolved after Rome it suffered bloat and other growing pains, but Shogun 2 was finally the one to get it right. A gorgeous setting and strong theme bolster the strategy side, where the honor of your clan leader and the struggle between Buddhism and Christianity play a key role. Battles offer distinct differences between clans (Chosokabe archers for life) and some especially fun special troops, like the bomb-throwing kisho ninja. Shogun 2 also introduced a two-player co-op campaign to the series, which is an amazing (though slow) way to conquer the continent.

Age of Empires II: HD Edition

We had to put this in here, too, even if Rise of Nations built upon this foundation in a bunch of ways. Age of Empires II is still a big draw on PC thanks to its HD edition, which is supported by new expansions like Rise of the Rajas, released in late 2016. That's not bad for a game released almost two decades ago. Build immense armies, upgrade them, farm like hell and enjoy a suite of entertaining campaigns in this RTS. Plus, if you get bored of the game's numerous campaigns and easily downloadable custom campaigns, enjoy making your own daft mash-ups in the scenario editor. We can't wait for the fourth game.



THE DIVISION 2 TIPS FOR BEGINNERS DIRECT FROM THE DEVELOPERS

Everything you need to get started with *The Division 2* tips straight from the developers themselves. **Leon Hurley**

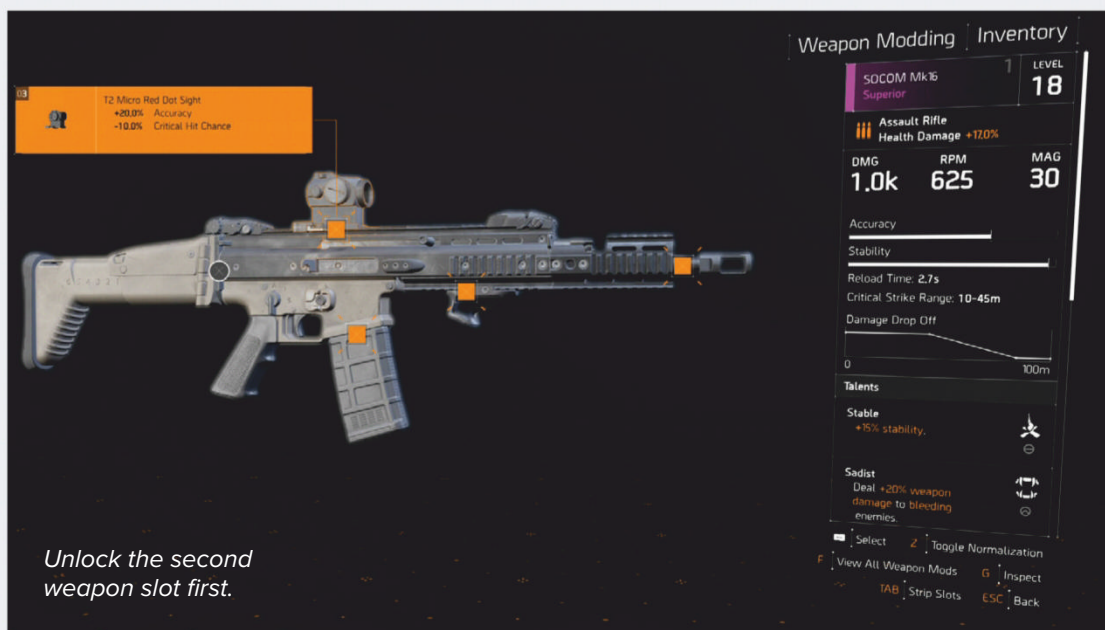
THESE DIVISION 2 TIPS WILL COME IN VERY HANDY IF YOU'RE THINKING OF GETTING INTO THE GAME POST-LAUNCH, BECAUSE THE DIVISION 2 IS A MAMMOTH GAME TO ENGROSS YOURSELF WITH. PRIOR TO THE GAME'S RELEASE, WE SPOKE TO ASSOCIATE CREATIVE DIRECTOR CHADI EL ZIBAOUI WHO GAVE US A PLETHORA OF DIVISION 2 TIPS FOR BEGINNERS, SO THERE SHOULD BE PLENTY OF HANDY TIPS IN HERE FOR ANYONE NEW TO THE GAME. READ ON FOR ALL OF OUR BEST DIVISION 2 TIPS.

DO THE FIRST MISSION!

Yes it sounds obvious for a *The Division 2* tip but it's easy to run off into the world and forget the essentials. The first mission doesn't just ground you in the story, it also give you vital progression. "You need to start by doing the first missions so you can get a taste of the main mission," explains El Zibaoui. However, more importantly, "this will also allow you to unlock a second skill slot so you can play with two skills." Once you've got that in the bag then you can wander off and see what's out there. "After that I would say don't hesitate to go off the beaten track and just observe what's happening in the world," says El Zibaoui. "It's dynamic and living, so things will change."

UNLOCK THE SECOND WEAPON SLOT FIRST

You can unlock whatever you want when it comes to skills and perks but one of those options is a secondary primary weapon to go alongside your pistol, and one of El Zibaoui's top *The Division 2* tips is getting that first.



Unlock the second weapon slot first.

"When you unlock your first skill you also get to unlock your first perk. My advice there is you should start unlocking the second weapon slot," he explains. "So as soon as you loot a weapon in the world you will have access to two different [options]."

ENEMIES HAVE ARMOUR NOW SO FOCUS YOUR SHOTS

"We've introduced armor plates on enemies who are very strong with full armor" explains El Zibaoui. His *The Division 2* tip when up against these protected enemies is to "first look for weak points" as most will have weak areas you can exploit, usually something with a red color. "Most importantly," says El Zibaoui, "you have to remember that armored enemies have different pieces of armor, so you should try to focus on one

of those pieces." It's worth it too as while it can take a while to wear down an enemy's plating, their health can drop really fast once it's gone.

YOU HAVE ARMOUR AS WELL THAT NEEDS TO BE MAINTAINED

The *Division 2*'s enemies aren't the only one with armor this time as agents are packing similar protection. And, in the same way as the bad guys, when your plating fails health can nose dive catastrophically fast. "When your armour goes down you have to be very careful and make sure you use an armor kit to repair it," explains El Zibaoui.

WHAT'S THE BEST GEAR AND SKILL FOR A FIRST TIME PLAYER?

This isn't an easy *The Division 2* tip to answer because as El Zibaoui explains,

Enemies have armour now so focus your shots.



Collect gear brand sets for a bonus.

IT'S EASIER TO GET LOOT FROM THE DARK ZONE NOW

In the previous zone the Dark Zone was a place to fear as you could fight hard to get a great piece of gear then lose it all in a clash with other players. This time things are a little less dangerous. "You won't risk anything the first time as there's a story introduction mission," says El Zibaoui. However, a big The Division 2 tip here that now there's also now loot you can send straight to inventory and keep without extraction. "In the first game you were looting contaminated loot and you had to extract it so there was a big risk and reward ratio, and sometimes you could lose everything. Now we've introduced direct to inventory loot so it no longer needs extraction. Of course the loot you extract will be better, but you have a more accessible experience that just goes to you inventory so even if you die you can keep it."

THE DARK ZONE ROGUE SYSTEM HAS CHANGED A LOT

One of the more interesting elements of the Dark Zone in the first game was the ability to go 'Rogue', effectively killing other agents for gear. You could get great loot but also mark yourself as a target to every other person in the Dark Zone. This time the Rogue system has "added more granularity," according to El Zibaoui. "We've introduced the notion of greed and theft," he explains. "You have the lower Gray Rogue level where you have the option to steal loot that will take you into that first level: so there will be a bounty on you but maybe [it] won't create a big incentive for other players to shoot you because then they might turn to the first level of [full] Rogue, which is the disavowed level."

IF YOU DO GO FULL ROGUE, PLAY FOR KEEPS

The Division 2's Rogue system's core escalation is killing another player/agent. When that happens you can get great loot, but also a timed bounty on your head meaning you'll really need to fight to keep it. "You need to try and escape other players during that time because if they kill you they will get the bounty and extra rewards," says El Zibaoui. However, if you think you can survive you can make things worse/better in search of better loot. "If you keep on killing players you will reach the manhunt status which his the biggest risk reward situation," says El Zibaoui. "To get out of a manhunt you have to interact with Division terminals that are spread in the Dark Zones. There are three of them. You have the choice when you reach one to trigger it and stop the manhunt [and] you will get the rewards accordingly. But you can chose to disable the terminal so you have two left, increasing your reward but reducing the choke points for players to come at you. The more you take risks the bigger the reward."

trousers, knee pads to gloves. As much for protection as looks, and this time it's all branded. It's not just labels either, as collecting sets can give you a boost. "Regarding the gear, we've introduced brand sets so every piece has a brand," says El Zibaoui. "If you accumulate gears of the same brand they will unlock talents. When you get two gear items with the same brand you will unlock a talent, three will unlock a stronger talent."

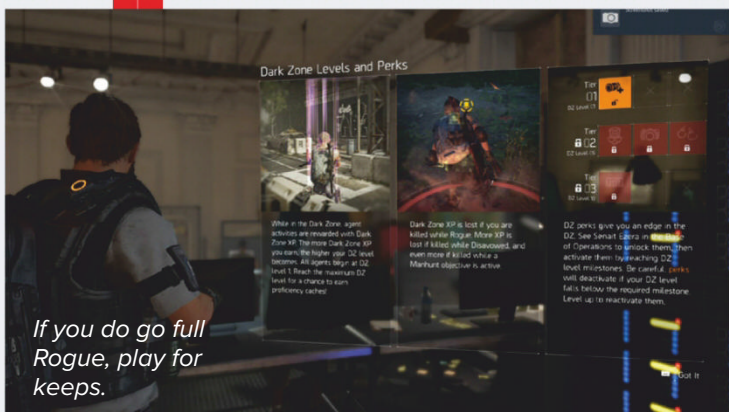
WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO PLAY AS A TEAM?

Like what items or gear you chose in-game, how to play as a team will depend on what you and your friends prefer. Whatever that is, it will help if you pick things that complement each other. "I think you will want to pick up a skill that will allow you to heal you and your teammates so you can have one guy focus on that," suggests El Zibaoui for this The Division 2 tip. Mixing up things like firepower and distance is also important: "maybe play as a sniper so you can have some range."

Out on the streets of The Division 2 you'll find control points that are basically barricaded spots on the road. These are "a very good activity," according to El Zibaoui. "You can approach it from any direction [and] it's an interesting challenge where it ends up with reinforcements with enemies a bit tougher than the others. You can also call in civilian reinforcements and it really creates a dynamic combat moment." However, as well as being fun there are also "great rewards from those activities."



What's the best way to play as a team?



If you do go full Rogue, play for keeps.

"it really depends on your play style. The automated turret also helps with crowd control, having the enemies focus on that and giving you some space." The main thing is picking stuff that helps you, as well as being fun. "There's one I really love which is the chem launcher which we had in the E3 demo. It fires a canister of gas and whenever an enemy steps in it you just shoot a bullet in and it will ignite the entire area. That's one of my favourites."

COLLECT GEAR BRAND SETS FOR A BONUS

The Division 2 is full of gear, from hats to



HOW TO LEVEL UP FAST

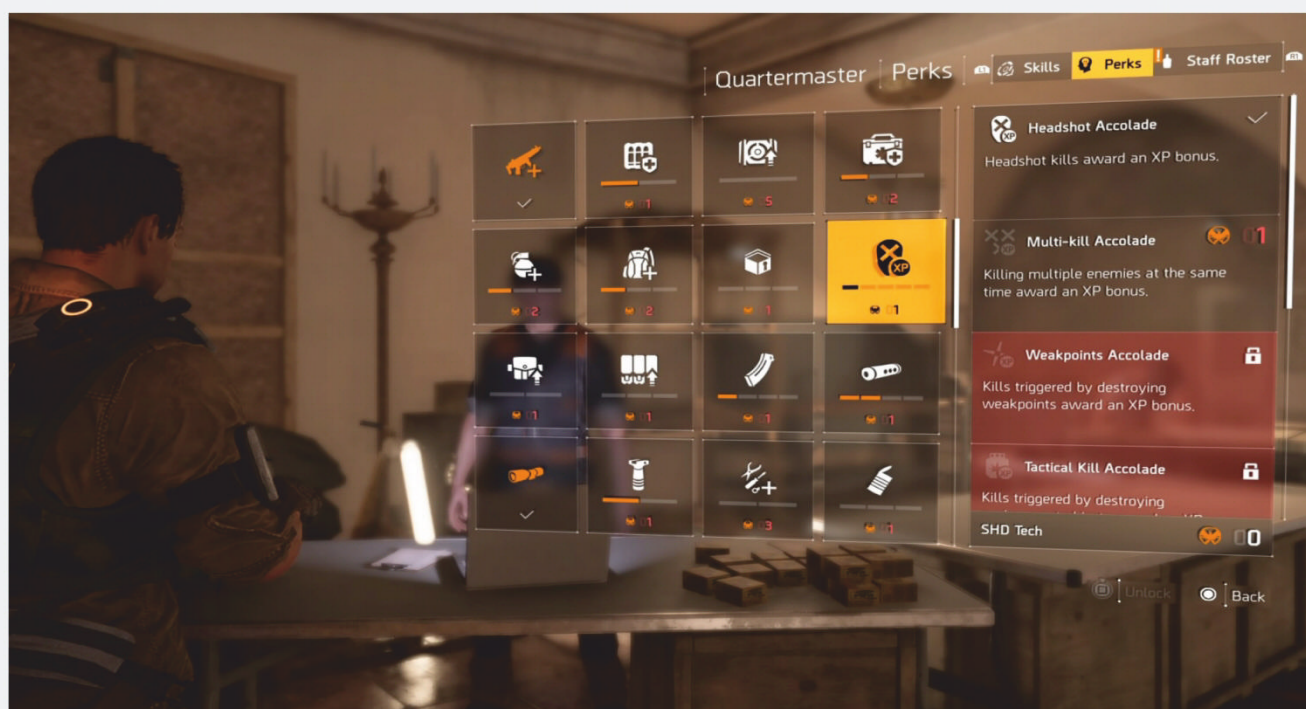
If you're wondering how to level up fast in The Division 2, look no further. Levelling up is one of the key aspects of The Division 2, since the game really opens up when you reach level 30 with all the lovely endgame content. We've got everything you need on how to level up fast in The Division 2, farm XP, and reach the level cap right here.

PICK PERKS TO EARN MORE XP FASTER

The White House Quartermaster in The Division 2 is your friend because without him you can't get new skills or perks - there's a reason why he's an early port of call when you first start. If you want to maximise your XP gains then you'll want to get a specific perks called Accolade. Like the other perks on offer this costs a single SHD tech point to buy and later level up, but instead of adding a weapon attachment or increasing inventory slots, Accolade will boost the XP you gain from certain actions:

Level 1 - Headshot Accolade: Headshot kills award bonus XP.

Level 2 - Multi-kill Accolade: Killing multiple enemies at the same time award



and XP bonus.

Level 3 - Weakpoints accolade: Kills triggered by destroying weakpoints award an XP bonus.

Level 4 - Tactical Kill Accolade: Kills triggered by destroying environment objects award an XP bonus.

Level 5 - Survivor: Not dying for a long amount of time, solo or in a group, will award

Pick perks to earn more XP faster.



Hit missions as soon as you reach the recommended level to feel the most benefit from the XP payout.



missions, but you really have to time them just right - too soon, when you're too low a level and it'll just be a painful slog. Too late however, when you're a much higher level and you'll find it easier but the XP payout will feel less satisfying against your current level. The trick is to hit the main missions (and the side ones) just as you hit the required level. It might be more challenging than coming back when you're overpowered but you'll feel the XP increase more.

PLAY WITH FRIENDS OR A TEAM WHENEVER YOU CAN

The Division 2 scales up according to how many players there are in a mission. That means more enemies and, because you earn XP for any kill made by someone on your team, more XP. It's basically free XP without you doing anything other than just teaming up with friends or matchmaking with whoever's around.

TICK OFF THE LITTLE THINGS ALONG THE WAY AS YOU TRAVEL

Things like public executions, propaganda transmitters and other little events don't award a great deal of XP but there are plenty of them. So, per job the payout isn't great, but overall it can add up. Especially if you plan a route to a bigger mission that takes in a few minor quests along the way. Throw in an enemy rich Control Point (especially if you've unlocked some XP boosting Accolade perks) and you'll get even more XP, as well as some good loot. These little extras also tie back into settlement Projects while Control Points also need supplies once you own them, all adding up to extra XP gains.

There are various Projects to complete at settlements that will make life better for the survivors living there. These usually require some resources you might have collected, or an activity completing in the world. It's all stuff you can collect and do as you go for the most part, meaning all you really have to do to collect some extra XP owed to you is remember to report in and accept them, so don't forget.

increasing XP bonuses.

These XP bonuses will really add up if you get them in early, and it's worth maybe forgoing some of the other perks initially while the game is easier to level up faster.

TURN ON THE UBI CLUB CHALLENGES

Hidden away in the Progression menu are Ubi Club Challenges. Head into the progression menu and hit the right bumper until you reach the little Ubisoft logo and a section called Club Challenges. These will revolve around things like 'Eliminate True Sons' or 'Eliminate enemies while they are on fire' and so on, and all of them will award progressive XP rewards if you complete them inside the 20 hour time limit. It's not a huge amount of XP initially per challenge, but you can activate all six at once and it all adds up. It's also XP you wouldn't otherwise be getting so grab what you can.

DON'T WASTE TIME IN DARK ZONE PVP JUST YET

I know the Dark Zone is fun and it's nice

to test your skills against other people but the progression system for that is unique and separate to the rest of the game. That means whatever time you spend in the Dark Zone and the progression you make there doesn't contribute to your main game progress. If you are chasing that sweet, sweet end game it's best to avoid the Dark Zone, at least for a while, so all your efforts count towards levelling up faster and getting you to the level cap.

HIT MISSIONS AS SOON AS YOU REACH THE RECOMMENDED LEVEL TO FEEL THE MOST BENEFIT FROM THE XP PAYOUT

It goes without saying that the most XP you can get in The Division 2 comes from the main story missions and side objectives. In terms of value for money the side missions are probably the best payout overall - they pay less XP compared to a main objective per go, but there's more of them, so the collective XP boost makes them worth ticking off.

Obviously the biggest single XP payouts will come from the main



As the military lines up a new generation of game-players in its sights, how well do our skills really translate to the battlefield? By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

Cassidy Little is a big fan of Tom Clancy's *The Division*. A TV presenter and actor you might recognise, he's especially fond of the game's harrowing mingling of PvP and PvE - the Dark Zone, an area of plague-ridden New York in which the distinction between friend and foe collapses and death costs you hard-won gear and character progression. *The Division* is, Little says, the only game to muster "a fraction of the adrenaline" he felt during his time as a Royal Marines medic in Afghanistan, which ended in 2011 when he was caught in an IED explosion, suffering extensive injury across his body and losing his right leg below the knee.

Betrayals are frequent in the Dark Zone, as players team up at random to tackle other squads or tougher NPCs, only to shoot each other to pieces for the lion's share of the rewards. Little likens this to the threat of friendly fire from allied Afghan units infiltrated by the Taliban - according to *The Long War Journal*, a total of 35 US-European coalition soldiers were killed and 34 wounded by such attacks in 2011. "I know of a lot of people who died because they were sleeping and one of the Afghan guys opened fire on the tent from inside their own compound. It's called 'green on blue', and it's a horrible thing. And in the Dark Zone you can't trust anybody, even the guy who's on your team." In Little's eyes, the risk of progress loss when you're gunned down in the Dark Zone also fosters a sense of consequence most shooters like *Call Of Duty* never provide, however dizzying their recreations of conflict. All that said, the game remains a fantasy about war with some elementary limitations. "You can never replicate the feel of being at war in a videogame if you can respawn," Little says. "Because trust me, if I could respawn after I lost my fucking leg, after I lost my friends, I would have. It's a shitty hand to be dealt."

To say that games about war fail to capture the experience of war may sound like stating the

obvious, but given the continuing intimacy between the game industry, military organisations and gaming culture itself, the obvious can't be restated enough. *The Division's* handing of assault rifles and grenade launchers to a sleeper force of civilian troopers reflects decades of military investment in videogames for the sake of training, testing, publicity and recruitment. This is especially the case in the United States, birthplace of the FPS, which in 2015 spent more on its armed forces than the next seven countries combined. The US Army is technically one of the oldest videogame publishers: its activities stretch from 1996's *Marine Doom* mod through 2002's *America's Army* to present-day military esports teams and *Operation Overmatch*, a free-to-play sim in which players test out prototype tanks and armoured cars.

Videogame developers, for their part, have fallen over themselves to embrace military trappings and themes, recreating real-world firearms and vehicles and enlisting service members as consultants and promoters. In some cases, developers have even built tools for the military, such as the *Virtual Battlespace* simulator series created by Bohemia Interactive Simulations, which was founded by the developers of *Arma*. One legacy of this symbiotic relationship is an underwriting of the

hobby by military jargon, from the commonplace use of military ranks in multiplayer progression to borrowed slang terms such as "frags", "fog of war" and "waypoint".

This common ground is integral to the UK Army's "Belonging" recruitment ads from January this year. Besides appealing to "snowflakes" and "selfie addicts", these court "binge gamers" with the suggestion that videogames nurture skills that can be readily transferred to soldiering. One YouTube video declares that the stamina required for a gaming marathon is just the right fit for a career in the forces: it intersperses footage of a boy's face bathed in the

||
**THE US ARMY IS
 TECHNICALLY ONE OF
 THE OLDEST VIDEOGAME
 PUBLISHERS: ITS ACTIVITIES
 STRETCH FROM 1996'S
 MARINE DOOM MOD**

glare of a fantasy RPG with shots of professional troops performing nighttime manoeuvres.

The ad campaign is provocative not just for implying that a healthy K/D ratio might prepare you for combat, but for resurrecting the cliché of 'gamers' as an ostracised group – a “misrepresented generation” of “timewasters”, in the words of an accompanying editorial in the UK Army-backed Locker Magazine. As Joseph DeLappe, professor of games research at Abertay University, notes, this is a poor reflection of the popularity of games today across many age brackets and backgrounds. “To target gamers for recruiting purposes is almost like targeting everybody. Especially teenagers, it’s kind of part of the world for them.” The new ads are thus something of an exercise in circular logic: they define players of videogames as misunderstood and closeted in order to rescue those players for military service.

In the eyes of German airforce mechanic Thomas, whose name has been changed for the purposes of this article, pitching to players is more about reaching young people than tapping into any skillset videogames supposedly teach. In the UK Army’s case, there is a pressing need for an injection of new blood, whether partial to Diablo III or not: the force is seven per cent below its required strength, at the time of writing, after missing recruitment targets for six years straight. The US Army, similarly, has struggled to lure recruits as the nation’s economy has recovered from the 2008 recession, missing its targets last year for the first time since the outbreak of the Iraq War. “They’re targeting a younger audience now simply because the current generation serving is mainly baby-boomers,” Thomas observes. “And they’re starting to get old or sick. From a human resources point of view I think it’s ingenious, because games are what younger people relate to. From a moral standpoint I think it’s kind of questionable, because it doesn’t convey the actual field of work. It’s

kind of dishonest, really.”

So is there any truth at all to the claim that playing games gives you skills applicable to military service? The answer is “some”, but it’s important, given the time and money spent flogging the idea of the game as a training device, to highlight the limitations of these portrayals. To begin with, videogames do instil management and teamwork skills that can be useful to soldiers. “What I experienced in NCO training was that people who didn’t play videogames typically had a much harder time finding their place in a group, analysing their own group’s particular skills, and establishing a leadership position than people who are playing games more regularly,” Thomas says.

“They had a much easier time identifying skills that could be useful, and listening to their teammates or their subordinates.” Shooters and action games may also be helpful background for roles, such as signalling, that require the ability to read and interpret stimuli quickly. On the other hand, “just because you play shooters and are good at aiming, doesn’t mean you know how to shoot a gun.” Indeed, as abundant as firearms are in videogames, virtual shootouts are woeful preparation for the reality. “You don’t get the impulses, you don’t get the smell, you don’t get the sound; you don’t get the feeling of the vibrations in the air.”

The Division’s Dark Zone aside, Cassidy Little has a few words of praise for Call Of Duty: Ghosts, which features a camouflage system and tutors players in the usage of “dead ground” – areas within range of a weapon system that are untargetable thanks to terrain factors. “The principles of why you are seen can be applied to a videogame and therefore vice versa, I would hope,” he says. “So, you could technically put together an eight-man fireteam, and breach a building in a PvP context, and hope they don’t shoot the civilians. You could use that as a learning tool, sure. But that doesn’t help with physical muscle memory of

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**PEOPLE WHO DIDN'T PLAY
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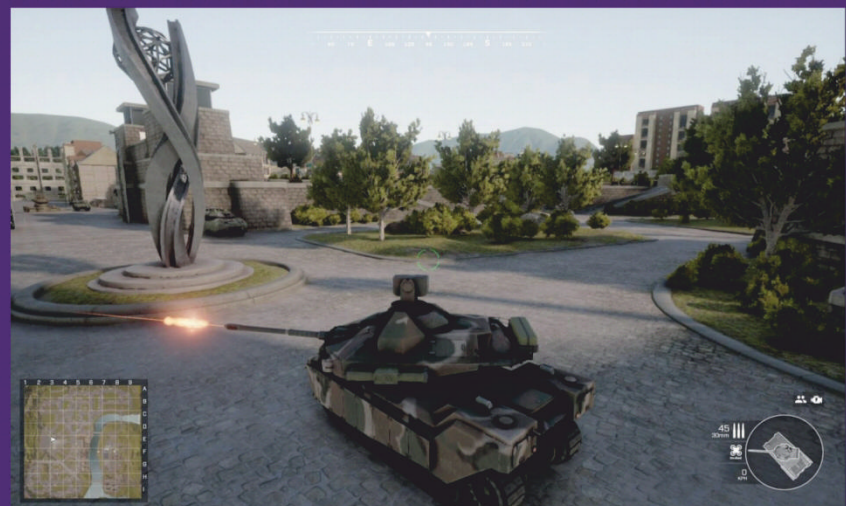
ABOVE Cassidy Little – actor, Forces TV presenter, and Royal Marine medic.
LEFT Based on commercial tech, Bohemia Interactive Simulations' Virtual Battlespace has been used for training and mission rehearsal by militaries in over 50 countries, including the US

BINGE GAMERS

YOUR ARMY NEEDS
YOU
AND YOUR DRIVE

FIND WHERE YOU BELONG
SEARCH ARMY JOBS

ARMY
BE THE BEST



CENTRE The Division 2's three Dark Zones represent something of a retreat from the first game's treacherous atmosphere.
ABOVE In the US Army's Operation Overmatch, data from multiplayer vehicle battles is used to assess prototype tech.
LEFT 'Gamer' bait aside, the UK Army's new ads also challenge stereotypes and feature a more diverse cast of soldiers



TOP In a rather chilling show of efficiency, Pandemic's US Army-sponsored infantry training sim Full Spectrum Warrior has been used in modified form to treat PTSD in Iraq war veterans.
 ABOVE Paul Sulyok – CEO, GreenManGaming, and British Army captain



ABOVE Advances in graphics technology and new VR headsets notwithstanding, there's still a place for physical props in modern tactical simulators. (MoD/Crown copyright, 2014).
 LEFT Many soldiers play videogames while in the field – for recreation, not training. Last year, Activision showcased Call Of Duty: WWII's DLC at US bases in Kuwait and Germany

having to carry a rifle, deal with stoppages, identify hazard zones, use the battle buddy system. There's not enough interface in a videogame to be able to teach that."

These are conclusions echoed by Paul Sulyok, CEO of PC retailer Green Man Gaming, who served as a captain in the British Army's light infantry during the 1990s. Sulyok identifies three key aspects of being a soldier – administrative, personal and an awareness of how your unit's actions support your commander's strategy, in which you may only be a decoy. "Soldiering can be a very technical occupation," he says. "How do you get something from A to B? The administration and the challenges around that are significant – 'I've got the following resources, I need to put them over there, this is how to do it'. The second element of soldiering is the personal one. People are fatigued, people are frightened, people are people. You can have the ability to allocate your resources from a technical perspective, [much as you] could be the best resource-managing gamer in the world, and still not be able to lead a bloke down the street. Let alone into combat." Videogames can, and have, engaged successfully with the academic or technical aspects of being a soldier, in Sulyok's view, but they are ill-equipped to portray the myriad stresses of being part of a group of infantry in the field. "When it comes to down to resource allocation, the academic side of soldiering, you can very much emulate that. But unless you're running up and down a hill, and you're soaked to the bone, and you haven't eaten for 24 hours, and you haven't slept for 48 hours, then you can't really use games to recreate a combat environment."

If they are dubious about simulations of combat, our interviewees identify one area where games, or simulations, might help soldiers navigate scenes of conflict – communicating the rules of engagement. These refer to the circumstances and conditions in

which you are permitted to use force, and the manner and degree of that force: they are the criteria, in other words, that theoretically separate a "just war" from indiscriminate mass-murder. The nature of those rules differs from country to country. In Germany, a country that has served as aggressor in two world wars, the rules are relatively tight, though how scrupulously they are observed is another question. "There's a row of checks we're supposed to go through for ourselves," Thomas says. "Is it right that my superior is ordering me to shoot that person? Technically you're supposed to go through all that, but I think many people shut that out, because they've been desensitised in some way. There's a German word for "blindly following", *kadavergehorsam*, and that's the type of person that, let's call them 'human resources', don't want in the German armed forces any more."

These are questions the creators of military games might explore, both for the sake of a powerful story and to provide a public service. There are precedents in military simulation tech. Little recalls using a lightgun-style simulator to explore rules of engagement, for example. "You have an SA80 A2 [assault rifle], which is the weapon system we used in theatre, and they have a screen in front of you, and they have a set-piece.

I think the one I was on was a vehicle pulling up, turning the corner, coming to a stop. And your job with this thing, there were two of you, was to pull the trigger if and when you think it's appropriate." Trainers then took their charges through the footage, rewinding each shot and asking whether it broke the rules. "If somebody's going to shoot at you, you're within your rights to shoot them. More importantly, if you think somebody's going to shoot you, you are fully within your rights to take them out, and say, 'I genuinely thought he was going to shoot me'. That being said, if somebody doesn't have a weapon and comes running at you, you can't just shoot them in the face, because it's like, how much damage could he

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**[YOU] COULD BE THE
 BEST RESOURCE-MANAGING
 GAMER IN THE WORLD AND
 STILL NOT ABLE TO LEAD A
 BLOKE DOWN THE STREET**

have done, and is there a way you could have defused the situation better?”

It's easy to imagine a great videogame narrative that explores the rules of engagement, communicating something of how a soldier might resolve an encounter with minimal bloodshed. Indeed, such stories are being told, just not by military games. Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series and BioWare's older RPGs, for example, often engage with the question of whether violence can be justified, and follow through on the consequences when it isn't. Military shooters, however, typically erase all ambiguity in order to speedily engage with the technicalities of combat itself, and seldom ask you to contend with the fallout: as Thomas notes, despawning bodies to free up memory also frees you from thinking about your victims. *The Division 2*, for example, opens with the player encountering two people in masks standing over somebody they've just shot, kicking the body. Even before you wander into aggro range and are fired upon, your opponents are thus unambiguously marked as deserving of termination. The Dark Zone is once again the aspect of the game which tugs against this creed, by suggesting that a band of heavily armed strangers might (however infrequently) have friendly intentions.

The lack of ambiguity around friend and foe in military games is shadowed by the increasing prevalence of unmanned vehicles or devices in combat, from mounted guns to Predator drones, which often use game-style controllers and interfaces. According to many former drone operators, the interface and procedures of drone warfare makes it hard to perceive targets as human beings, and harder to apply the rules soldiers are supposed to apply in the field. Speaking to *The Guardian* in 2015, former US drone pilot Michael Haas compared launching a strike to “stepping on ants”. This is partly because drone programmes often operate on the fringes of

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legality, and are not subject to the same juridical rigour as other modes of warfare. In July 2018, a UK all-party parliamentary probe derided government arguments in support of two drone strikes as “weak and inconsistent”, and labelled the US drone programme a potential violation of international law. Drone strikes continue to be popular with politicians, however, because as in videogames, drone warfare can be waged without direct cost to the pilot, though the psychological toll is often severe.

“Our warfare is more and more drone warfare, and drone warfare is zero casualty for us,” Little tells us. “We're talking about people sitting in boxes in Nevada, controlling vehicles that are capable of doing huge amounts of damage, and [the key skills are] your hand-eye coordination and understanding of drone technology, as well as the software drones use – not necessarily programming the software, but the ability to interface with that, to look at a screen and treat that as your world, as every gamer does. You think about the hand-eye coordination that's required to be the best *Call Of Duty* player – if you can apply that to a drone, you've got one hell of a soldier, one hell of a bomb-dropping machine.”

Joseph DeLappe comments that this is, in essence, the completion of the circle of inspiration between military organisations and the game industry. If it's hyperbole to declare that war has become a game, there is a sense of mutually reinforcing callousness between military games and the rise of remote-controlled weaponry. “What's fascinating and horrifying to me is that things like America's Army had similar roots to the training games they were developing for the US military, and now [those games] have kind of crossed over into actual use, in military technologies from drones to other remotely guided technologies, robotics. I think we're just seeing the tip of the iceberg.”

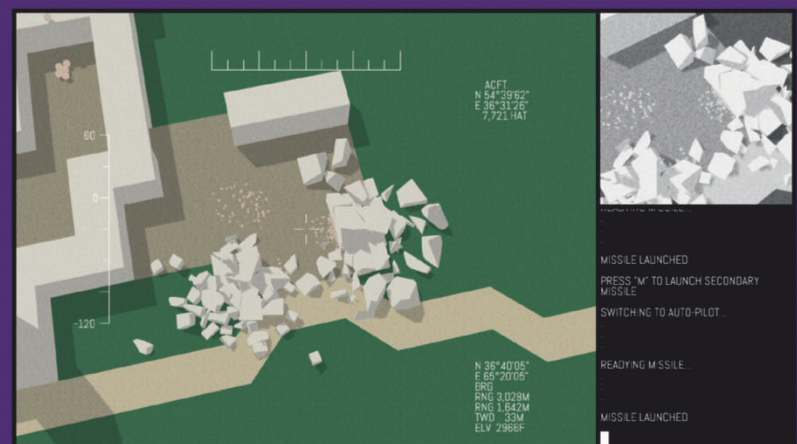
RIGHT Dating back to 2002, *America's Army* is perhaps the most successful 'militainment' videogame series ever made. It has been exhibited at hundreds of events around the US. *BELOW* *Modern Warfare's* *Death From Above* mission is a raucous celebration of airpower, a highlight reel in which the game's opposing forces are reduced to smeary silhouettes



ABOVE Joseph DeLappe, artist and professor of games research. *BELOW* Available on Steam, *Killbox* takes its name from the practice of designating a 3D target area for aerial and indirect fire, developed by the US airforce in the 1980s

SABOTAGE TACTICS

Artist and academic Joseph DeLappe has spent years attempting to subvert the ideologies of military videogames from within. In 2006's *Dead-In-Iraq*, he typed the name and date of death of every US service member killed in Iraq into the *America's Army* chatbox, turning a glossy recruitment tool into an eerie public memorial. 2016's *Killbox*, created in partnership with Scottish developer Biome Collective, simulates a drone attack from the point of view of operator and victim. Its reduction of humans to orbs and deathless white-on-green environment speaks to the difficulty of empathising with a target when viewed through a drone interface. "I like to think that the work will eventually reach good numbers of people," DeLappe says. "Particularly young people who maybe aren't thinking about the actual costs of joining the military."



THE SECRET SCI-FI GREATNESS OF **CALL OF DUTY: INFINITE WARFARE**

What's considered one of the most disappointing COD games is full of smart world building. Gareth Damian Martin

WHEN I THINK OF THE SCIENCE FICTION GENRE, THE FIRST THING THAT COMES TO MY MIND IS THE TOUR OF THE NOSTROMO THAT OPENS 1979'S ALIEN. IT'S A SURPRISINGLY DELICATE SEQUENCE - THE SLOW DRIFT OF GREEBLED SPACESHIP-SURFACES PAST THE CAMERA, THEN THE CUT INSIDE, PATIENTLY SLIDING THROUGH CORRIDOR AFTER CORRIDOR OF ANGULAR METAL AND ORNATE PANNELLING. WE FINALLY SETTLE, AFTER DUCKING UNDER A CEILING SLUNG WITH MACHINES AND MONITORS, AT THE SHIP'S BRIDGE, AND JUST AS WE ARE WONDERING WHEN SOMETHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN THE SHIP BLORPS TO LIFE, RATTLING AT US LIKE A DISTURBED SNAKE. THE SEQUENCE AS A WHOLE IS A KIND OF CALLING CARD FOR CINEMATIC SCI-FI, A COMMITMENT TO THE DRAMA INHERENT IN BEING ENCLOSED INSIDE A GIANT MACHINE, FLOATING IN A VOID COLDER THAN DEATH ITSELF.



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**INFINITE WARFARE
 MANAGES TO NOT JUST
 BE A SERVICEABLE
 SCIENCE FICTION GAME,
 BUT A GREAT ONE
 AFTER ALL.**



In comparison, the opening sequence of *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* feels distinctly inelegant. Coming to the game this year, motivated in part by research for my own science fiction game, *In Other Waters*, I was only playing the game to wander around its central spaceship hub, *The Retribution*. I wasn't impressed by the opening, starting on the soft curve of the Earth with its accompanying narration on the villainous Settlement Defence Front, or by being dumped behind the visor of one of the series' near-inseparable soldiers (Wolf, this one is called) ready to drop onto the ice of Europa. There were bloody melee kills, synchronised headshots and everything else I was expecting from a *Call of Duty* game, but then minutes later Wolf was dead, and something new began.

Two breathless hours later, now securely set up in the Bridge of the *Retribution*, I understood that there was more to

this game than I had expected, and, with my mind drifting to thoughts of *Alien's* opening sequence, I realised that against all the odds, *Infinite Warfare* manages to not just be a serviceable science fiction game, but a great one after all.

THE 'BAD ONE'

That was doubly surprising considering *Infinite Warfare's* shaky pedigree. After all, this is the bad *Call of Duty*, the one whose YouTube debut was disliked to oblivion, the one where that pernicious military phrase "boots on the ground" came into use and the one that sold 50 percent less than its series counterparts. After release Activision even distanced itself from its own game, with CEO Eric Hirshberg claiming "it just didn't feel enough like *Call of Duty*". It's also hard not to see *Infinite Warfare's* 'failure' as contributing to the death of the *Call of Duty* campaign, with *Black Ops 4*

releasing without one altogether.

But perhaps "not feeling like *Call of Duty*" is what allows *Infinite Warfare* to aspire to something else. After the rote prologue, the game abandons the series' typical character switching, for example, instead keeping you firmly in the boots of one Commander Nick Reyes. This allows it to string together a continuous set of missions that seamlessly take you from a grand celebration, through an invasion, into orbit, into a chaotic space battle and then drifting into land on the *Retribution*. Unlike the prologue, this exhilarating charge doesn't dump lore on you, instead it elegantly lets you walk through it. Walk-and-talk is the trick here, switching out cutscenes for mobile meetings that keep forward momentum and stay economical on the details. Momentum is everything in these first missions, and there are few games that can match the sense of headlong pace the game delivers. And in these two hours *Infinite Warfare* comes to life in the transitions it makes between the shooting, not the shooting itself.

The true star of the show is the tech that enables this pace. *Call of Duty* has always had a slightly unsettling obsession with deadly military tech, but with *Infinite Warfare* this obsession mutates from weird gun-fetish to something that meshes beautifully with its science fiction world. Just as it was Ridley Scott's famously detail-obsessed eye that led him to start *Alien* with a loving wander through all of his pristinely fashioned sets, so it is *Infinite Warfare's* love of chunky, believable tech that leads it to lavish the players attention on the literal nuts and bolts of the game.

AND BEYOND

“
**THEY DON'T WASTE
THIS SPACE, USING IT
FOR A QUICK BACK-
AND-FORTH BETWEEN
YOU AND YOUR
WINGWOMAN**”



From the moment the game puts you in the cockpit of one of its Jackal multi-role fighters you begin to understand the drive behind it. Decked out with what look and sound like chunky CRT monitors, mechanical keyboards and enough toggle switches to outfit the bridge of the *Nostromo*, these jets are less futuristic sheen and more *Top Gun* in space. Like *Alien's* iconic industrial spaceship, the focus here is less on “realistic” and more on “real”. Holograms, AR and touch screens may be more convincing future interfaces, but nothing feels or sounds as real or as tactile as a monitor warming up, a toggle switch flicking back and forth or a vacuum seal locking in.

Once the game stations you on the deck of the *Retribution* this tactile, *Top-Gun*-in-space feel only increases. Everywhere you go on this ship (which is less of a space cruiser and more of an '80s aircraft carrier with all the external doors welded shut) you are accompanied by the groans of the hull, the hiss of pipes, the click-clack of mechanical keyboards. Every surface is covered with tech, yet these are not the nonsensical greebles of *Star Wars*, but heating pipes, cable rails, and fluorescent tube fittings.

Many years ago I used to work on the HMS Belfast, a WW2 warship permanently docked

in central London as a floating museum, and it is the engine rooms of this stout and storied warship that *Infinite Warfare* brought back to me, not the interior of a *Star Destroyer* or *USS Enterprise*. These wonderfully functional spaces are filled with busy-ness too – the cacophony of the flight deck (inexplicably wet, as if it had just been whipped from the top of an ocean-going vessel) loaded with working engineers and whining forklifts, or the focussed studiousness of the bridge, with its retinue of ceaselessly typing sonar operators bathed in screenlight, a bottle of water propped up in the corner of their stations.

HARDWARE WARS

Yes, I was pleased to find the game's hub to be as wonderful as I had imagined, but it was the way this weighty, tech-obsessed feel bled out into the rest of the game that really got me. Every mission you take, for example, the game has you launch your Jackal from the *Retribution*. The launch sequence, an exquisitely detailed process focused on the drama and texture of hydraulic lifts, airlocks and

shimmering interfaces filled with obscure calculations, tells you all you need to know about where developer Infinity Ward's priorities were. And yet they don't waste this space, using it for a quick back-and-forth between you and your wingwoman which sets up the mission ahead better than any briefing, showing that the game's economic approach to space doesn't just apply to the ship design.

The missions themselves also flicker with the drama of shock depressurisation, ridiculous transforming weapons, and jumping from ship to void, to interior and back out again, with all the crunching tech those transitions entail. There's a love throughout, not of scientific accuracy usually associated with “hard” sci-fi, but of engaging with the physical and technical weight of war in space. In *Infinite Warfare* physics is not a rulebook to be religiously followed, but a generative system, one that allows Infinity Ward to imagine what solutions and systems of offence and defence combat in a vacuum might entail and have fun making them as weighty and satisfying as possible.

It's all about texture, the texture you can feel – that's why everyone in the *Retribution's* bridge is endless clacking away at their keyboards, or your Jackal has a bespoke animation for the little ladder that hinges out of its ornately plated hull panels. That's what *Alien's* opening is about too, surrounding you with texture, with detail, with a sense of the danger of the void. *Infinite Warfare* wants you to feel that texture, to engage with it. It basically forces you to by making you launch your lovingly crafted space-jet every mission. That's where its sci-fi greatness stems from: this understanding that it's not the lore dumps and text scrolls of intergalactic wars or whimsical planet-hopping that makes space such a compelling setting, but the sheer weight, the complexity, the technicality of life and death among the stars.

THE
MOST FUN
YOU CAN
HAVE WITH
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BLIND