

A Personal History of the First-Person Shooter (FPS) Computer Game

I started this document many years ago when my friend “Shanky” Viswanathan wanted to know about these strange computer games I played. He wanted to try one. I wrote a summary of the games I’d played to that point for someone who knew nothing about “shooters”. I obviously did a good selling job. A few weeks later I got a phone call from India. “All Hell has broken loose. I’m in the reception area but all the doors are locked or jammed. Where do I go now?” He was playing Half-Life. I’ll let you supply your own answer!

I carried on updating the original document just to remind myself of the games I’ve played. It’s in the order in which I played the games, not the chronological order of their release. It’s also completely subjective and I make no apologies for that. I rarely go back and change a rating or my wording. Obviously the definition of “great graphics” or “smooth gameplay” is going to vary as technology moves on.

If you’re reading this and you’re just starting playing games, I hope it’s a useful introduction to what’s out there. If you’re an experienced shooter, then I hope it’s a nice walk down memory lane and will prompt the odd splutter of outrage or grunt of agreement.

EDIT: I’ve been updating this document for so long now that it’s almost becoming a real history of the FPS. Many of the games I’ve rated highly are now budget, or even abandonware, but still have great entertainment value. It’s worth giving them a try.

EDIT2: As I write this, (2010), a genre of FPS based around WWII, and more modern warfare, has developed. I tried them with the early Call of Duty and Medal of Honour games but they don’t do it for me. Many of these are well thought of and moved the form forward in their own right. So, I withdraw my above remark about this being a “real history”. I still hope it’s useful, though.

EDIT3: When I started playing FPSs, the only platform was the PC. Now (2012) game consoles have the largest part of the gaming market, though I still hold that FPSs play better with PC controls. If you don’t spot a favourite game, it may have been a console-only release.

Rating System

Although most FPS games can be played as multi-player games over the Internet, and can be better in that form, my interest is in solo play and that’s how I’ve rated them.

*****	Play at all costs
****	Great game
***	Worth a play
**	Play if it’s free and you have nothing better to do
*	Don’t play even if it is free!

Dates are when I played them, not release dates

Castle Wolfenstein 3D (1992) *

Hunt down nasty Nazi's through the rooms and corridors of Castle Wolfenstein. Lots of running down similar looking corridors with appalling graphics. Any shape you like as long as it was rectilinear! A massive choice of 4 weapons all of which made uninspiring "pop" and "phut" noises. You probably wouldn't want to play this nowadays but it was the game that made the FPS possible. (EDIT : It was included on the Return to Castle Wolfenstein special edition CD (see later). I loaded it up for old time's sake. It's terrible!)

Doom (1993) ****

This is the game that established the genre. A gigantic leap forward in 3D engines and exciting gameplay. Wide-open rooms and exteriors and more monsters than you could shake a rocket gun at. You're a space trooper on the moon of some planet or the other. Something has just opened a breach between your base and somewhere very unpleasant. You arrive back to find all your compatriots mad and working for the enemy. And the enemy isn't very nice either! You better sort this out then. Grab a gun and let's go.

Everyone's favourite weapon is the shotgun and that tradition has permeated through many of its successors. Most FPS's feature some variation on the shotgun theme. Top weapon was the devastating BFG9000 (BFG - Big F***ing Gun). However, there is a certain charm in grabbing an invulnerability power-up and going in with the chainsaw (yep – chainsaw!).

In fact it was 2D masquerading as 3D. You couldn't look up and down and only shot forward. Anything in the line of fire whether below or above you got hit. However, this didn't detract from the gameplay. My wife knew she had a potential addict on her hands when she walked in as I was shouting "Oh God! Oh God! Where's my rocket gun"! She shook her head pityingly and left me to get on with it.

By today's standards, crude and limited but it's a brilliant intro to the genre. I'd recommend that you try it, even now.

EDIT: I withdraw that last paragraph. The genre has moved on so far that Doom couldn't cut it nowadays. Perhaps that other landmark, Half-Life, would be a better introduction.

Doom 2 (1994) **

Unfortunately, only an extension of the original with a few new weapons and enemies. However, it did introduce the double-barrelled shotgun. Line up those monsters and take out two at once!

Heretic (1995) **

Known as "Doom in tights". You're a fighter/magician tracking down the four demi-deities who are taking over your universe in a fantasy medieval environment. Quite good fun with a number of innovations over Doom. Water would flow, trying to take you with it. You also had the ability to look up and down, to look around and aim. The Ethereal Crossbow wasn't quite a replacement for the shotgun but it was ok. I did like the spell that turns your opponent into a chicken, which still tries to give you a nasty peck!

Duke Nukem 3D (1996) ****

Actually, not quite 3D. You could look up and down, jump, fly with a jetpack and swim under water (and drown!) but it was based on a 2D map so you couldn't truly be 'underneath' an enemy. It became known as 2½D.

However, this is a minor criticism compared to the wonderful comic book gameplay. Duke Nukem started out as a character in a couple of well-received platform games. So the game designers didn't bother to explain why Earth was being invaded by pesky aliens, again. You just jump straight in. This was one of the first game to model 'real' city streets and locations.

Weapons include a pump-action shot gun, pipe bomb, grenades and trip mines that explode as enemies pass though the laser trigger - amongst many others. If you run out of ammo, you still have Duke's Big Boot and can give your opponents a good kicking!

It is very funny but very rude. Duke talks incessantly. "Let God sort it out" as he lobs a pipe bomb into a bunker of nasties, "I'm gonna rip him a new one" as he creates new and interesting holes in his opponents and, of course, "Cool!" as he finds a new and even more violent weapon!

The game also includes dancing girls who can be bribed to take their tops off, monsters that turn into blobs of dogs-do when you kill them, the LA police force turned into were-pigs and a ray gun that makes enemies expand until they explode! One Boss threatens you with "I'm gonna rip off your head and s*** down your neck". Once you beat him, there's a cut scene where you walk over to him, rip off his head, drop your trousers and the final frame is you sitting down with a newspaper! Not necessarily a game for your mum and dad!

Blood (1997) ***

Used the Duke Nukem game engine to create a world of the undead and occultists set in the mid-20thC. It tries to repeat the Duke Nukem comic book atmosphere and pretty well succeeds. It is ridiculously gory but fun. It was the first game to allow you to set your opponents on fire with a flare gun or kick their heads around after you've blown them to bits. This comes in very handy in a fairground scenario where you use heads to kick at targets. You also get to shoot some very annoying, but innocent, mimes that get in your way! I have a soft spot for this one.

Quake (1997) ***

The first true 3D engine. Suddenly you have to look all around you constantly. It had a huge impact on the FPS scene. On reflection, it was let down by its storyline. It's minimal to say the least. It feels medieval but you have modern weapons. There doesn't seem to be a 'theme' to the monsters. However, the potential for action made it perfect for internet/multi-player gaming and it really established that form of play. As a solo game, I couldn't go back and play it again. However, it was the first of its kind and variations on the Quake game engine were used for more modern and better games.

Hexen - Heretic 2 (1997) **

"Quake in tights". As Heretic used the Doom engine in a medieval fantasy setting, so Hexen used the Quake engine. Excellent graphics for its time but I found the gameplay a bit repetitive. You can get a rather nice staff that launches a swarm of flying demons at your enemies, which is quite good fun. This time, you can change your opponents into sheep who try to give you a serious nibble!

Quake 2 (1998) ***

Second time around, they decided to give Quake a storyline. It's one of the few games that give a plausible explanation of why you find yourself alone against a world of nasties. It also introduced the idea of goal or mission based play, with a controller giving you objectives as you fight your way through. I liked this much more than the original.

Half-Life Generations*****

For many years, considered the best PC game(s) ever, full stop! It started with Half-Life itself, this was followed by Opposing Force and finally Blue Shift. These are now sold together under the title Half-Life Generations

Half Life (1998) *****

You're a minor scientist, Gordon Freeman, in a government research facility. Most games come with documentation telling you about the game scenario, the weapons you can use, the nasties you might face and how to interact with the game. With Half-Life you get – nothing! There's a playable training session that teaches you how to use your protective suit, since you work with radiation and other nasty substances. Then the game starts with you going to work one day.....

For the first time, you don't have to kill everything. People will talk to you and, possibly, help you. Blasting everyone in sight works against you. There are no cut scenes. If something has to happen to move the story on then you will meet someone who will tell you what's going on. There are genuinely shocking and surprising events. The overall effect is of being the leading character in a film.

No game has given me such a sense of achievement at completing a particular scenario. I couldn't stop playing it and have played it through a second time, since. All I'll say is watch out for the bloody helicopter gun ship!

Opposing Force (1999) ***½**

This follow up to Half-Life uses exactly the same story and locations as the original but this time you're one of the troopers sent in to try and sort things out. It's very weird coming across locations you remember from

Half-Life but at different times or in different circumstances. You even see Gordon Freeman at one point.

Even so, it feels like a completely different and fresh game. There is a lot of co-operative play when you meet other troopers, much more than in the original. If H-L and Op. For. had been released in the reverse order, this would have got the five stars. Another game I've bothered to play a second time.

Blue Shift (2001)***

The third entry in the Half-Life universe that, needless to say, uses the H-L engine. Exactly the same plot but this time you're one of the security guards in the Black Mesa facility when it all goes pear shaped.

Astonishingly, this is still very playable even though you know the environment and plot very well. You come across references to the characters you've played in H-L and Op. For.

Two main criticisms. It completely lacks the co-operative play that made Op. For. feel like a different game to H-L, although it could do with it on a number of occasions. Secondly, it is very short. Just as you think you're about to go back to Zen because of a transporter cock-up, everything turns out to be ok and you win! I'm not convinced the designers meant it to end there but time and money ran out!

SiN (1998) ***

A near-future world dominated by corporates where money talks. As part of one of the privatised police forces, you are the law! It uses the Quake engine with mission based play like Quake 2. It has nice touches like having innocent bystanders you mustn't shoot, different parts of the body can take different levels of damage and 'stealth' missions that you will certainly fail if you go in blasting. There are some nice humorous touches such as when you accidentally fall through a ceiling into the ladies' shower room (guards are summoned!). Our villainess, Elexis Sinclair, is a particularly well-endowed soul who you can catch on camera bathing if you figure out how. Childish – absolutely!

Unfortunately, they rushed SiN out when they saw Half-Life coming and it was only 90% developed. They had to send a free major upgrade to early purchasers and there was a constant flow of patches released on their website. Any version you buy now should be fine. It would have caused a stir if Half-Life hadn't happened first.

Wages of SiN (1999) ***

This time they finished off the game and this is probably better than the original. The dangerous technology developed by Elexis Sinclair and her corporate empire in SiN has fallen into criminal hands. So, it's you against the Mob. Well worth a play.

Blood 2 (1999) *

A brand new 3D engine (LithTech) was developed for this follow-up to Blood and this was supposed to be a showcase for it. Technically it's excellent. Very impressive graphics and movement but this doesn't make a game. It's hard to the point of being frustrating and lacks the black humour of the original no matter how hard they try. The only game I haven't bothered to play to the end.

Star Trek Elite Force (2000) *½**

The only Star Trek game I've played. It's based on Voyager and you play through an 'episode' of the series. Most of the characters from TV make an appearance and it recreates the look and feel of the Star Trek universe very, very well. It's got a strong storyline but relies too often on cut scenes to progress the otherwise excellent plot. It does do co-operative play with your AI colleagues extremely well. You are frequently part of an 'away team' and you really feel the other people are working with you.

It is quite a short game, not very taxing, low on gore and, I guess, aimed at the younger player. However, I quite enjoyed it!

Deus Ex (2000) *****

Some would describe this as a 'role playing game' rather than a FPS. You certainly have a lot of control over your character's abilities and development but you still look at the world over the barrel of a gun.

We're in the near future again. Government is breaking down, Corporates are on the rise (sound familiar?) and terrorism is rife. You're part of an international law-enforcement agency trying to quell the terrorist insurrection. Many of its top agents are bio-enhanced with implants turning them into part-machines. You're

the second of a new breed with nano-enhancements boosting your natural physical abilities but still leaving you very human.

You die very easily in Deus Ex, which came as a bit of a shock to an old blaster like me! It's more about stealth and tactics. But there's still plenty of fun with a gun!

The really impressive aspect of the game is its openness. There are always several ways to achieve your goal. You have to develop your character carefully to succeed but I'm sure everyone does this in a different way. You're limited in how much you can carry so you stick with the weapons and items that most suit you. I know there are a number of weapons I never used throughout the entire game.

Last, but far from least, the plot is superb. Nothing is as it seems and you are presented with any number of political and moral choices, which change the flow of the game according to your decision.

And the theme tune deserves to be on a cinema blockbuster Do you get the message that I liked it!

EDIT: One of my rare excursions to update a game. In 2008 I loaded up Deus Ex again. I was blown away. Sure the graphics look crude but the gameplay beats anything since, even the so-called sandbox games like STALKER. I knew it was good first time around. Now, I realise how good. 5 stars and the theme tune is still great!

Undying (2001) *½**

The storyline is by Clive Barker so, as you can imagine, it's pretty scary. Great graphics, good plotting and pretty good gameplay. Initially, I found it a bit uninvolved but it gradually pulls you into the story. It really hooked me during a 'scene' exploring the ruins of an old monastery in which you find a way to travel back through time. Suddenly the ruins are whole buildings and it's populated!

The ability to use spells with one hand and weapons with the other gives you many options to devastate your opponents but you need the dexterity of a 10 year old to press the right buttons. I mastered it in the end.

The final denouement leaves the plot wide open for a sequel. I'd buy it.

Gunman Chronicles (2001) ***

This uses the Half-Life engine to create a world where the law enforcers at the edge of planetary exploration have more than a little to do with the early American West. Lured to a world by a renegade General with a grudge against you, you escape his traps to pursue him and his creations across the Galaxy aided by a mad mainframe you meet along the way!

It deserves the title "Gunmen" because almost every gun/weapon can be tailored to a number of different modes. I'm sure I didn't use some of the weapons to their optimum, merely because there were too many variations.

So, plenty of blasting but it's got a fair plotline, with characters you meet moving the action along rather than excessive cut scenes. Unfortunately, it's not as involving as Half-Life. Worth a play though.

Serious Sam (2001)*½**

By the year 2001, the FPS had developed to allow the almost cinematic experience of Half-Life, the open game play of Deus Ex and the novel-like plotline of Undying. Then a group of mad Eastern Europeans, Croteam, decide to reinvent Doom for the 21st century!

It's all here. Weapons, ammo and power-ups littered about for no apparent reason, outrageously powerful guns and more monsters than you want to imagine. And I mean lots of monsters. Croteam have developed a game engine that can control the AI of tens of monsters in play at any one time. Yet they still managed to keep the graphics detailed and quite stunning.

I won't bother to explain the plot, it's virtually irrelevant. Just grab a gun and ammo and kill anything that moves because, if you don't, it will kill you! You blast your way through a ridiculous number of horrible and deadly monsters and just as you think the game can't throw any more at you it throws more at you. No redeeming features. A complete blastfest. I loved it!

System Shock 2 (2001)****

This is the game that made Deus Ex possible. I never played the original System Shock. It needed quite a high spec PC for its time and it sounded a bit cerebral for an old shooter like me. However, having been indoctrinated into the thoughtful world of Deus Ex, I thought I'd give this sequel a go.

And well worth it. Like Deus Ex, you have been enhanced to accept upgrades that can increase your abilities. These abilities are your basic characteristics (strength, agility, endurance), weapon use, technical knowledge and psionic power. You make a choice at the beginning of the game whether to join the army (tough, strong, good with weapons), the marines (good with technology) or psi ops (guess!). As you upgrade through the game, you can progress faster in those areas in which you've been trained but you can choose any abilities.

You're assigned to the first star ship, heading into deep space on an unspecified (to a grunt like you) mission. However, you start the game waking up in a laboratory with little memory of your past on a ship that's obviously in trouble. Guided by communications from someone who seems to be on your side, you head for safety(?). There are lots of good plot twists. A nice touch is that you often find personal logs of individuals. Sometimes, they give you information about what's going on. Sometimes, they're pure asides or just amusing. You can follow a touching love story as you race through the disintegrating ship.

You die very easily in SS2, almost on a realistic level, so it's pretty tough. It took me a long time to complete. The final boss was a bit of a let down but resolving the plot made it well worthwhile. Recommended.

Return to Castle Wolfenstein (2002) *1/2**

See Castle Wolfenstein 3D at the start of this document. It's the follow up released some 10 years later. You even get loads of secret areas, treasure to collect and hot meals to heal you! Albeit now done with beautiful and realistic graphics.

You're an American Special Ops agent working for the allies in 1943 during WWII. Your intelligence people have been receiving scraps of information about occult happenings around Castle Wolfenstein. They don't believe any of it but they send you and your partner in to check it out, just in case.

You start the game having been captured and imprisoned in Castle Wolfenstein. You break out of your cell and things start to get strange very quickly. The rumours were all true and pursuing the Nazis ultimate aim takes you around Germany and Europe through some great graphics and excellent scenarios. You get to use many realistic WWII weapons and some that didn't quite exist (a super-sniper rifle, portable chain gun and a tasar weapon). As you blast your way through and unravel the plot you find that you have to Return to Castle Wolfenstein

I have a couple of criticisms. The plot is fine but, even after suspending belief, there are a number of gaping holes. Secondly, it's mission based (like Quake 2) with you being told exactly what to do by your HQ. This jarred with some otherwise very realistic gameplay. On the good side, it was just tough enough keeping the game play flowing without constant saves and repetition but not a piece of cake by any means. The stealth missions were particularly enjoyable and that's from someone who doesn't usually like them. A very worthy sequel.

No One Lives Forever 2 : A Spy in H.A.R.M's Way (2002) **1/2**

This is a 1960's spy spoof like Our Man Flint or, more recently, Austin Powers. You get to be ex-cat burglar, now super-spy, Cate Archer fighting against the evil H.A.R.M organisation. The first NOLF was supposed to have been quite good. It wasn't a game that I 'noticed'. NOLF2 is an example of a sequel exceeding the original.

There are so many things that make this an outstanding game. As well as the usual weaponry, Cate also has gadgets like a powder compact that turns into a hacking device, an eye shadow box that turns into a tasar stun gun and a perfume spray that evaporates dead bodies! As you can tell, this is a game with a sense of humour. However, it's not the comic book humour of Duke Nukem or Blood. It's more sophisticated than that. There are top-class cut scenes with good animation and excellent voice acting.

However, the humour doesn't detract from the action. The set pieces are the best of any game I've played to date. There's a dash by snow scooter to escape a Siberian army base, a sword fight in a house being sucked into a whirlwind and a chase through an Indian town with you on the back of a tricycle being pedalled by a Scotsman in a kilt in pursuit of a midget on a unicycle! I was laughing so much during the latter that I almost

got killed!

Add in excellent graphics (using the same engine as Blood 2 but what a difference!), convincing locations from Antarctica to India & a good plot and you have a great game.

EDIT. Tidying up my games collection in early 2010, I realised my copy of the game was missing. I must have lent it to someone and forgotten about it. I bought a new copy to fill the gap in the DVD rack. I loaded it up for old time's sake. The graphics have aged but are still acceptable. However, the gameplay still deserves every one of those *'s. Excellent.

Medal of Honour : Allied Assault (2002) ****

Well, here we are back in the 2nd World War. Return to Castle Wolfenstein mixed 'reality' and fantasy. This is all *reality*! You play a Ranger (an American commando) on various missions towards the end of the war. There's a mix of working with a team and missions when you're on your own. The settings, weapons and gameplay are very realistic. This means you die fairly easily but so do your enemies. It's always worth going for the head shot rather than spraying bullets around. And make best use of your medical supplies.

MOHAA was the game that knocked Half-Life off the PC Zone "Best FPS" chart. Personally, I don't agree. Of course, the power of the game engine has moved on (though this is yet another Quake variant) and the graphical detail is superb. When you walk through a bombed French village, it feels like you're walking through a bombed French village!

However, it's still mission based, with a menu telling you what to do next and a compass telling you where to do it. At least in NOLF2 the compass had a purpose beyond pointing you in the right direction (if you used tracking darts). The game presents lots of opportunities where people could tell you what's going on or you could use a radio. The scenarios are not so wide open that you could get seriously lost. I'm not fond of this kind of play and with the rest of the game being so realistic, I thought it was a missed opportunity. Finally, the AI when working with allies was worse than Opposing Force or Elite Force. Sometimes it was a pain trying to keep the idiots alive!

Where MOHAA does score highly is on its scenario design and set pieces. The Omaha Beach Landing has been compared, justifiably, to the opening sequence of "Saving Private Ryan". You watch all hell break loose as your landing craft heads for the shore, the gangway drops, you run forward with total chaos all around you and then die! You try again. Another 10 metres further forward this time and then you die! It seems almost impossible but it's not. It is a hellishly hard bit of gaming but when you beat it, the sense of achievement is as great as any game I've played. So, a tremendous game but, for me, flawed by over-direction.

Unreal 2 : The Awakening (2003) *½**

I really enjoyed this game. A good old-fashioned shoot 'em up without being as pointlessly violent as Serious Sam or as cerebral as Deus Ex. It reminded me a lot of Quake 2 but brought up to date with better AI, co-operative play and a stronger storyline. So why only 3½ stars?

First, the good things. The game engine is the next generation of the Unreal item and very good too. It handles tremendous graphics and lots of action very smoothly without having to shut down all the background tasks on the PC. It has a reasonable storyline (a bit cliched but it's only a game!) moved on by good cut-scenes with convincing voice acting. There is plenty of co-operative play with interaction between you and your 'friends'. You can find yourself in charge of a squad, telling them what to do next. Unlike NOLF and MOHAA objectives are only a handy reference list of things to do that you should have already figured out from the gameplay. You have to go and find things yourself and quite rightly.

So what's wrong? The game is brilliant for gung-ho fire-fights. Go in, weapons blazing, and you probably wouldn't notice the problems. However, do anything sneaky and you can highlight major flaws in the AI or scenario design. Some examples. In two different set-pieces, you're with a group of friendlies holding off an attack until support arrives. If you just keep out of the way and avoid being killed, you will be rescued accordingly. This is odd because in another set-piece you have to defend the gates of a repair base and if they're breached, you lose. Why didn't they do the same for the other scenarios?

Again, on two occasions you find yourself commanding a small squad to defend an objective. You can send them roaming around the perimeter and such but the obvious thing to do is surround the objective and "do a Rourke's Drift.". In one instance, the only access to the 'objective' is down two long, narrow corridors. Just wait 'til you see movement and lob down enough ordnance to take out a small army.

Taking an unexpected route also confuses things. On more than one occasion nasties fell off high places trying to aim at me. The 'exciting' climax of one episode was completely by-passed by running like heck and ignoring things that were happening around me. And while on endings, bosses were often beaten, just by ducking behind inaccessible pillars or whatever and slowly wearing them down.

But these problems are only a few disappointing instances in an otherwise most enjoyable game. Definitely worth a play.

Halo (2003)*½**

Halo originally appeared on the XBox where it was considered to be **the** console FPS. This was a port to PC, which showed (see later). The game reminded me a bit of Unreal 2. Earth is at war with a group of aliens called The Covenant. You are a cyborg or enhanced human - the game keeps you guessing. Your battleship crashes on a strange ring-like world (Halo) and it becomes clear that the covenant are searching for a super-weapon on the planet. Off you , and the surviving crew, go.

The game has some good touches. You can only carry 2 types of weapon at a time, which makes you think about what and how you're going to attack. Your armour self-charges and while it's fully charged you're close to invulnerable. However, if it depletes it takes time to recharge and suddenly you're very vulnerable. Cooperative play with the other survivors is quite good. What is outstanding is the use of vehicles. You get to use an "all-terrain" jeep thing, a tank thing, a hover thing and a flying machine thing! The game goes into third-person view when you enter a vehicle but driving/flying is very intuitive and great fun.

However, the game is let down seriously in two ways. Firstly, its console heritage shows in that you can only save at certain points (checkpoints). This can become very tedious. The designers expect you to take a very linear approach. On more than one occasion I did the unexpected and triggered a checkpoint before completing the section I was supposed to, which meant I had to finish two sections before being allowed to save again. Secondly, and most importantly, the level design is very lazy, using very similar maps for different areas. At one point you re-trace your steps through what was quite a good section first time around but second time through, it becomes boring. I understand that internet play is excellent, and I can believe it, but for solo play it doesn't come up to current expectations of a PC FPS.

No One Lives Forever : The Operative (2003) ****

This is the first NOLF game (see previous review of NOLF2). I bought this as a budget stop-gap (until I got Call of Duty for Xmas) because I enjoyed NOLF2 so much. What a stunning game! Cate Archer has only just joined UNITY and the establishment aren't at all convinced that a woman is up to the job. This is the '60's, remember! However, there's a mole in UNITY and agents are being assassinated at a frightening rate so they grudgingly send her into the field.

Naturally, the graphics aren't in the same class as its successor but the game play is outstanding. There seems to be a never ending set of episodes all tied in closely with a top class plot. The voice acting isn't quite up to NOLF2 but some of the overheard conversations and cut-scenes are brilliant albeit often bizarre. The "You look like a man who needs a monkey" routine was included verbatim in NOLF2!

The set pieces aren't quite up to NOLF2, either, but Cate finds herself falling out of a plane without a parachute (watch out for the subsequent brief cut scene - hilarious), escaping from an imploding space station and fending off attack helicopters from a cable car. And she gets to ride a Triumph motorcycle! A perfect example of how great gameplay shines through above style and clever graphics. I was very tempted to give it ****½ but games have moved on. However, this is very highly recommended.

Call of Duty (2004)*½**

Another WWII shooter. The action takes place towards the end of the war. You get to play an American, a British and a Russian soldier in various campaigns. CoD picks up where the Omaha beach landing in MOHAA left off. You *believe* war is Hell! There's (a lot of) noise, confusion, panic, mayhem and death. CoD was top of the PC Zone FPS chart when I played it. So why only ***½?

First, the good things. The graphics are incredibly realistic, even better than MOHAA. The AI is outstanding. Your comrades don't just follow you aimlessly. They act independently so you feel you're just another army grunt, not a super-soldier, which further heightens the realism. Similarly the enemy work together, duck, hide and pick their moment to attack. If you wanted to show someone what war is like in all it's awfulness, this is

the game to do it.

So, what's the down side. Since you play three different soldiers, there's no character development. You don't care about the character because you're going to discard it and move on. The scenarios are very impressive but you just feel you're playing through a series of set pieces rather than a linked story. Again this leads to a feeling of discontinuity. I return to my hobby-horse of being over-controlled. There's only one way through each episode and you have a compass and objectives list to make sure that's what you do! Lastly, the designers obviously had the console implementation in mind, so you can guarantee that shortly after an auto-save, you're going to find a load of munitions and med packs. There's little incentive to be careful or preserve ammo. So here we have the complete reverse of NOLF - tremendous graphics and levels of realism but a lack of immersive gameplay.

Far Cry (2004)**1/2**

So close to being the Half Life beater! You're ex-Special Forces Jack Carver, now running a tourist sailing business somewhere in the Pacific. A journalist hires you to take her to some remote islands, previously used by the Japanese in WWII. She goes ashore on a jet ski and the next thing you know, someone's taken your ship out with a rocket. You scramble ashore and things get dangerous very quickly.

The game uses a new game engine, CryENGINE, which give the gorgeous, bright, sharp graphics of Serious Sam but with the ability to handle a large interactive environment. In Serious Sam, you had wide open vistas but nothing much happened beyond the 'corridor' of play. Here, you often get whole islands to explore. A compass marks the direction of your next goal but you're at liberty to head off in any direction. Consequently, there are many ways to approach an objective. You can take the obvious route and go in guns blazing or find a really obscure path to let you hide and snipe at the opposition. Consequently, you can complete a chapter without finding half the people/things on the island. You can go back and re-play it taking a completely different approach. Tremendous game design.

The character AI is also outstanding. They warn each other of your appearance and work together to out-flank you. They hide from your fire and are as patient as you are before sticking their heads above the parapet (sometimes literally!). They have look outs with sniper rifles or chain-gun emplacements guarding main routes. You can die before you even see an enemy. And when you do meet an enemy, they're tough. Don't let them 'gang-up' on you or you're certainly dead man walking!

What lets it down? The plot is lifted straight from "The Island of Dr Moreau" (but with a few twists). You can pretty well guess what's going to happen next. There's none of the suspense and confusion of Half Life or Deus Ex. As is becoming the norm, the game was designed for both PC and console. Consequently, saving is via fixed checkpoints and as it can be seriously hard (even on Medium), you can end up doing some bits again and again. However, a bit of research on the net revealed that you can save 'in flight' by typing in "\save_game" from the console. Why they didn't bind this to a key for the PC version, I have no idea. Lastly, there are loads of vehicles from hang gliders to trucks. Vehicle movement has been designed for the console with keys controlling left, right, forward & back. It was just about ok for boats in wide open spaces but I found it too clumsy for jeeps and trucks on island tracks. I gave up and took to walking everywhere. I'm sure it will be second nature to console players but I would have killed for Halo-style controls. However, overall a superb game that I could barely stop playing.

Deus Ex : Invisible War (2004) ***

The sequel to Deus Ex. It's 20 years after The Collapse caused by JC Denton at the end of the original. Society has fragmented into a number of factions, apparently working side-by-side but there's plenty going on beneath the surface veneer. You play Alex D, a top student from the Tarsus Academy, able to accept bio-mods, which are now more common than in Deus Ex. The game starts with Chicago wiped out by a terrorist attack and you, plus a few others, escaping to Seattle. The story goes from there.

DX:IW has been accused of being "dumbed down" for a console implementation. I have to agree. The inventory is simpler, there is 'generic' ammunition used by all weapons, there are fewer bio-mods available and it's easy to max them quickly. Bio-mods are also very powerful. Give Alex a repair-bot and a spy drone and he can wipe out swathes of enemies in total safety. And it may be that I'd just played Far Cry but the enemy AI seemed very poor. You still have the freedom of choice you had in Deus Ex but you're spoon-fed the options rather than being allowed to discover them yourself. Again, probably aimed at the console (younger?) player. I played at the Normal level (as usual) and considered the game easy.

Worth a play but a pale imitation of the original.

PainKiller (2004) **½**

I bought this as a filler until Doom 3 or Half-Life 2 finally arrived. From the reviews, I expected a sort of Serious Sam. It turned out to be a much better game than that. You start the game with you, Daniel, and your wife driving on a stormy night. You're involved in a car accident in which you both die!. However, your wife makes it to Heaven but you end up in a purgatory that reflects elements of your old world, albeit a nightmarish version, and populated by a variety of soul-eating Demons. Fall to a Demon and you really go to Hell! You are approached by a messenger (angel?) who tells you that Lucifer is planning an attack on Heaven and is mustering its forces in purgatory. If you can 'kill' its four generals, you will be absolved and allowed into Heaven.

OK. It's a ludicrous plot. However, it allows a series of absolutely brilliant scenarios, based in Earth-like locations from a 1930's train station to a medieval monastery. The graphics are superb by any standard (at time of writing) with unique textures used for each scenario. You won't believe the Opera House - astonishing. Like Serious Sam, you get armies of demons to take on. Although their AI isn't as good as, say, Far Cry, they are considerably brighter than Serious Sam monsters and much more varied. The same 'type' of creature can also change as the scenario gets tougher. For instance, Evil Monks start out with axes to attack at close quarters but half-way through, you suddenly find they can throw them at you from a distance.

To face these horrors you have 5 weapons, each with 2 modes of use. These vary from machine and rocket guns to fantasy weapons, such as the Stake Gun, which fires 4' wooden stakes! Best of these is your basic weapon, the PainKiller. In one mode, it's a spinning blade for close-up devastation. In its other mode, it shoots out a sort of grappling hook on a laser beam. Hit something with the grapple and it not only hurts them but can also drag them towards you. If the grapple hits an immovable object, it sticks leaving a laser beam between you and the grapple. The "rag doll" physics applied to the demons when you hit them is hilarious, pinning them to walls, blasting them into the air or sending them sailing over your head.

Shortly after you kill something, it releases its soul, which hovers above it for a few seconds. If you can grab this, it gives you an extra health point. Also, once you've collected a number of souls, you morph into a demon for a few seconds during which time you become invulnerable with a devastating attack. Just to make things even more interesting, you can collect "Tarot Cards" if you complete a scenario in a particular way (e.g. kill all demons, only use the stake gun). These cards give you the sort of power-ups (temporary invulnerability, extra base health) you might find placed abstractly in other games. However, cards cost gold to use. Gold can be found through the scenarios, so it's good to check out the environment and not just kill things. Gold is often found as Holy Relics in hidden areas and the secrets in this game are real challenges to find and reach.

Finally, certain scenarios are locked at the easier levels of play and you must collect a certain number of tarot cards to allow you to play through on a higher level of difficulty. I rarely re-play a game but went through PainKiller three times to do all the scenarios. Fortunately, the nature of the scenarios change at the different levels, requiring changes in strategy. All in all, a thoroughly enjoyable, traditional, blast-fest with enough variety to require your brain to engage.

EDIT. It's not often I revisit one of these reviews but over the years I've returned to PK again and again. The replay value never fails to amaze me with all sorts of challenges (all secrets, all items, all souls) to keep the game fresh. Since this is a subjective list, I've had to up the rating to ****½.

Doom 3 (2004) ***

A huge disappointment. This was heralded as the game to move the genre forward. In some ways it did but more of that later. The storyline fleshes out the original Doom 'story' and uses updated versions of the monsters and weapons we know and love (?). You're a marine, newly arrived on Mars base when all Hell (literally) breaks loose.

Firstly, the good things. The graphics are as good as everyone predicted. The next step towards photo-realism. However, I had to seriously upgrade my PC to get smooth game play and high quality definition. The creatures are equally impressive and beautifully animated. The story moves forward in "real time" with few cut scenes.

So what went wrong. Damn, it's dark! The designers set out to make the game as shocking as possible with things lurching out of the darkness and shadows. They quite often succeed (I jumped on more than one occasion). However, this is taken to extremes. I can't think of any part of the game after Hell breaks loose that is anywhere near well lit. Sometimes, you are in pitch black. And what do you get to cope with this? A

flashlight that you must hold *instead* of a weapon. We're several centuries into the future. No night goggles? Or how about just strapping the blasted torch to the end of a gun! You see something in your torchlight, swap back to a weapon and it's too late - you're being savaged by something or the other. I found this very annoying .

And these "something or the others" are placed in such a way that you've got almost no chance of applying tactics or strategy to take them on. They just spring out of walls or spawn behind you. It's all about instinctive "run and gun". Consequently, you're given loads of health, armour and ammo. As long as you actually survive an encounter, there's a pretty good chance you can top up with goodies shortly after.

Finally, although the graphics are brilliant, you are confined to endless walkways, passages and claustrophobic rooms. This conspires to make play feel very repetitive. OK, this walkway looks completely different to the one in the last chapter but you still know an Imp is going to jump out of a hidden compartment shortly and another spawn behind you immediately after. Perhaps I thought this was realistic. I just found it all very frustrating. It was an effort to finish the game.

Since PC Zone rate it in the top 5 of it's FPS chart, I must assume it's me. I guess I prefer gameplay to graphics. So, only the three stars.

Painkiller: Battle out of Hell (2005)*½**

The expansion pack for Painkiller gives more of the same and nothing wrong with that. There are some new Tarot Cards to collect (far too powerful, I didn't use them!) and plenty of new and varied demons to blast with two new weapons. As for the scenarios, the Loony Park fairground is a classic with a brilliant roller coaster ride (but too short). All in all, very successful. A minor criticism is that it could obviously have been much more. You can see that episodes were scaled down to get the game out of the door to compete with D3 and HL2. A shame but still a very good play.

Half-Life 2 (2005)*****

It took a good few years for a game to surpass Half-Life. And what do you know, it's Half-Life! At the end of the first game, Gordon Freeman is hijacked by the mysterious "G Man". This game starts with our hero being "woken up" by him and being mysteriously transported to a train approaching its terminus. That's all you know. You soon figure out a number of years must have passed and a lot must have happened to planet Earth. I won't give the plot away.

What makes it so good? The graphics are astonishing. It's a very realistic representation of a near-future world. You can interact with nearly everything in it. Most things that should move, do move, following real physics. That includes crates, barrels, furniture, wrecked cars and washing machines! The game passes in real time with no cut-scenes. Things happen to you "cinematically" to let you know what's going on (or not!). You have friends and allies as well as enemies. Special attention has been given to facial animation, resulting in the most realistic characters ever.

So, how about game play. The opposition AI is very good. There are no easy tricks to fool them. Probably not as good as Far Cry but close. Human(oid)s are very accurate, so if you're going in blasting be very quick and equally accurate. You often have followers working with you. They tend to be a bit suicidal. I started trying to keep them alive but gave up. What's needed is a "Stay where you are while I sort this out" command. However, they are much more accurate than you in a fire fight.

The missions are hugely varied from city streets to a village infested with head crabs and zombies to canals and lakes to an alien stronghold (Doom 3, please note). Time passes, so there are day and night scenarios. Play is quite linear, though. Once or twice I would have liked to have had the free movement of Far Cry.

There are two vehicles to use. A hovercraft for the canals and lakes and a buggy for overland. The hovercraft section was hugely enjoyable, skimming over lakes, down canals and through drainage pipes. The turbo on the buggy leads to some spectacular jumps and a race against an express train. Halo has the edge for vehicle control but this is the best pure, first-person driving, ever.

And what about the guns. You have much the same set of weapons as the original game (but no Zen weapons). As you start out on your adventures, Barney (remember him?) throws you a crowbar to break through a doorway ("Hey Gordon. I think you dropped this back at Black Mesa"). However, the star is the Grav(ity) Gun. Not designed as a gun but a heavy lifting tool. However, you can pick things up and throw them. If that happens to be an explosive barrel or acetylene bottle, that's quite effective. In itself it has a

satisfyingly violent effect on flying mechanical devices. It can also pull things to you from a distance. And, of course, it can be used for its proper purpose, lifting heavy things to create barricades where you want them or piles of crates you can climb. Great for camping.

All in all, the best FPS gaming experience ever. I wonder when it will be beaten again? Half-Life 3?

EDIT (late 2006) : After a long break, I replayed the game. Broadly knowing what was coming, I could sit back and admire the game design. No change of view. It's the best.

Tribes:Vengeance (2005) *½**

An odd but enjoyable game. Tribes 1 and 2 were aimed at multiplayer gamers. For this evolution (effectively Tribes 3), they added a single player scenario. And a very good storyline it is too. It spans twenty years in the low-level war between the Empire and the Tribes - think sci-fi Romans and Barbarians. The story unfolds out of sequence, jumping back and forth to different points in time, which works very well as a narrative. Weirdly, you play different characters depending on the episode. You could be an Imperial Princess, a Tribe Leader or an android assassin for hire. Unlike Call of Duty, this works surprisingly well.

Everyone wears varying types of armour. Light means you move fast but are less well protected through to Heavy which restricts you to clumping along but you're built and armed like a tank! All armours allow you to jet into the air for a short period. This means you have to develop a whole new way of fighting. However, the weapons reflect this need with lots of grenade/rocket devices as well as the usual blasters and machine guns. Armour also comes with anti-grav boots which allow you to 'ski' down slopes. You can pick up great speed over the right terrain. I was rubbish at this! Vehicles used the Halo approach and were very intuitive and fun.

The individual campaigns were very much a curate's egg. Some were extremely inventive. For instance you find yourself playing a child trying to survive an attack by the enemy. Suddenly you have no armour or weapons! Conversely, many were thinly disguised multiplayer scenarios except the game AI was controlling the opposition. This included the ability to re-spawn when killed. This jarred with the other scenarios when dead meant dead. I didn't enjoy these particularly. In fact, most scenarios were designed for outright attack with limited scope for stealth.

All in all a very acceptable game but with limitations for the single player.

The Chronicles of Riddick : Escape from Butcher Bay (2005) ***

What a title! I'll call it CR:EBB. The Riddick character first appeared in a minor sci-fi film called "Pitch Black", which became a surprise hit. The character next appeared in "The Chronicles of Riddick". It was obviously meant as the start of a franchise but was a bit of a flop. This is the game released alongside the movie. Fortunately, the game acts as a prequel to both movies and stands in its own right. In fact, I believe it's supposed to be considerably better than the second film!

You get to play Riddick as he is imprisoned in the impregnable Butchers Bay facility. Your objective is to get out. Initially, this requires lots of information gathering from other prisoners and carrying out secondary tasks to find a way forward. This is done very well and is not as tedious as you might expect. Initial action tends to be fist and knife fights. These are ok but I suspect they work better on a console, on which the game originally appeared. As things progress, you face guards with guns. You are under-armed and under-armoured in comparison and so stealth is very important. Crouching in a dark corner makes you close to invisible (a bit like NOLF 2). Part way through the game you receive the "bright eyes" which featured in the movie. That is, you can see in the dark. So, knock out the lights, creep around and even heavily armed guards are in trouble. You do get bigger guns to play with and occasionally you get to 'borrow' power armour for a real blast-fest but it's definitely the stealth element that makes the game interesting.

The plot's fine, moved along by the occasional cut scene. Thankfully, you don't have a compass directing your every move. Neither do you have detailed maps. In fact, the maps included are completely useless. I wonder if the developers were just having a little joke. The graphics are good enough to make locations unique and memorable. As a bit of fun, you can collect packets of "smokes", each of which opens some extra media you can look at later, such as original concept art.

Not a very hard game and quite short but excellent graphics and some original game play makes it worth a go.

Area-51 (2005) ***

It's finally gone pear-shaped at the fabled Area-51 base! One of the scientists has let loose a bio-weapon being developed there. You're part of the second HazMat team to go in and try to clear up the mess. The first one didn't come back! The subsequent storyline is hardly original, drawing on the likes of Resident Evil and, even, Half-Life. However, it does pull together almost every conspiracy theory you can think of, which is quite good fun. This includes finding the film set on which the Apollo moon landings were faked!

The gameplay is pretty run of the mill. The graphics are ok. You get the usual selection of weapons, including a couple of alien types. You move forward in real time with some good cut-scenes to move things on (David Duchovney, of X-Files fame, voices the lead character). You get a small arrow pointing you in the right direction when you're looking for something that your character would recognise but you wouldn't. This isn't intrusive, though.

The USP is that you can choose to transform into a mutant yourself after becoming infected during the game. This gives you infra-red vision, increased speed, you're tougher and you have a ranged attack of 'squirting' contagion. Unfortunately, this rarely gave you any advantage over being the human side of the character armed to the teeth, which he usually is. I rarely bothered to use the option.

Lastly, it's an adaptation from a console game. Consequently it has the dreaded "checkpoints only" saving method. Not even a "quick save" option. This is really annoying because there are one or two really tough bits when, if you fail, you go way too far back for the restart. It just becomes tedious.

All in all, a perfectly good FPS to pass the time but not groundbreaking.

F.E.A.R. (2005)*½**

First Encounter Assault Recon. They're a team that deals with the little unexpected things in life, like an army of psychically controlled soldiers. And you've joined just in time to enjoy the fun! The action takes place in the very near future. The aforesaid army is loose and your job is to find the controlling source and stop it. However, there's more to it than just that and things get very weird and spooky. I jumped on more than one occasion.

First disappointment, there's the potential to fight alongside your fellow squad members but although you meet them, it's only in glorified cut scenes. You soon find yourself on your own again. You have a fairly realistic set of weapons to work with. My favourite was the Penetrator, firing metal spikes. A bit like the stake or bolt guns in Painkiller. There's plenty of ammo and armour about. You could probably go in blasting much of the time and survive.

However, these armaments are nothing special to take on such a dangerous force. What you do have are almost super-human responses, allowing you to move and act very fast for short periods of time. This is the game's USP and great fun it is, as well. As you move fast, your view of the world goes into "bullet time". I used it constantly to survive. The AI of the opposition is so good (on a par with Far Cry) I would have been in real trouble without it.

Second disappointment, you spend most of your time in buildings of one description or another. There's no outdoor scenes. Even so, the graphics are so good and varied, it almost makes up for it. It also makes for very linear gameplay. Third disappointment, the environment looks great but is not very interactive. It's better than Doom 3 but nothing like as good as Painkiller or Half-Life 2. I wanted to move a barrel to allow me to jump over a wall. I'm a super-fit, highly-trained marine but could I shift it? I could not! Fourth disappointment, since you're indoors, the only vehicles are in cut scenes. I'm not a big vehicle fan but it does vary the gameplay.

Last disappointment, although the storyline had huge potential the ending was a bit of a damp squib. It's nice to either resolve the plot (NOLF, Deus Ex), make a final dash for safety (Halo, Quake 2) or overcome some final enemy (Doom 3, Half-Life - even Painkiller) but this was a let down on every score.

What F.E.A.R. does (you versus enemy squads in enclosed environments) it does astonishingly well with brilliant AI and graphics. But it's a one note game and although it's a very good note it can still get monotonous. That said, it's still very playable and if F.E.A.R. 2 addresses some of these problems, I'd definitely buy it.

Quake 4 (2005) *½**

Given how mediocre Doom 3 turned out to be, I loaded this, from the same developers, with some trepidation. I'm pleased to say it was much better. You pick up where Quake 2 left off (Quake 3 was aimed almost purely at MP gamers). The battle with the Strogg continues. You're part of an assault which doesn't go tremendously well. In fact you're captured and almost turned into a Strogg but more of that later.

The game uses the Doom 3 engine but much more effectively with indoor and some outdoor scenarios but they are all much more varied than D3. The enemies are varied and very tough with good AI. You have a good choice of weapons and some have a built-in flashlight (so they learnt something from D3!). You often find yourself with a small squad. If there's a Medic or a Tech in the squad, they may be able to 'mend' your health or armour. Sometimes you have to protect an individual squad member. Other times, they're cannon fodder to help you through. You get to drive tanks and use a heavy armour suit. There are also set pieces with you manning a gun on a train. All in all, far more varied than D3.

The USP is the fact that you are captured and partly made into a Strogg part way through the game. Fortunately, you are saved before they brainwash you. This leaves you with the physical abilities of a Strogg, allows you to use Strogg weapons and able to go where humans could not. This makes you the only candidate for an attack on the Strogg's main communications system, which leads to the climax of the game.

Weaknesses. If you are using a tank, or whatever, you are pretty well invulnerable. I managed just by racing through these sections. There are also two major battles that you can tackle the same way, just running like hell to the objective, throwing a switch and running back again. In fact the AI of the enemy is excellent for head long battle but doing anything out of the ordinary confuses them and can leave them open to be disposed of more easily. That said, I found all the opponents really tough (playing at one level above 'normal') but this balanced the availability of ammo & armour nicely. Any easier and I'd have been permanently at full strength.

So, nothing original or groundbreaking but a solid, modern FPS.

SWAT 4 (2006) **

Oh Dear! I really didn't enjoy this game. You play a SWAT officer leading a team of four others in a variety of situations from a gang riot in a night club to an assassination attempt on a foreign diplomat in a hospital. You gain points for keeping you, the team and civilians safe. You lose points for not reporting your progress and indiscriminate mayhem! Depending on what difficulty you choose you have to gain a certain amount of points to continue to the next episode.

So, what are the good things. The graphics are good with each scenario having a distinct look and feel, from ruined tenements to state-of-the-art office block. You have command over your squad which is broken into two teams of two plus snipers where appropriate. The command system was very good and relatively intuitive. I thought this would be my biggest problem but it was ok. Since each episode is relatively small and self contained, you have great freedom in how you tackle the situation. Very good. So where did it fall down for me.

First of all, the AI of your team. You have to keep them alive and kicking if possible, otherwise you lose points but also going in mob-handed is more likely to cause the opposition to give up. However, keeping them alive can be hard work. You can crouch and advance carefully but they don't. Conversely, they have no concept of diving for cover and just stand there getting shot at. They'll get hung up on a harmless civilian when there are other "bad guys" in the room. You can tell them to gas grenade a room but instead of following it straight in they compose themselves while the gas is clearing! Aaaargh!

Associated with that is the general requirement to always give a warning to the enemy to drop their weapons before shooting. Shooting a nasty without a warning gives you a big penalty. Now, guns are very realistic in this game. They do a lot of damage on both sides. You can have been in a firefight in a room but because you forget to shout at the last enemy you incur a penalty which can ruin your chances of success.

Last and worse there is no save facility. One mistake and you have to start the whole episode all over again. Since you can be killed with a single shot (fair enough), you can almost complete the mission and then the tiniest mistake means you're back to Square One. I can understand why they did it. Saving would make these smallish scenarios too short. However, for me, this became so tedious, I almost didn't finish the game.

SWAT 4 has been in the PCZone Top 10 since its release and I know it is very well thought of. But this is a

subjective view and it was not my kind of game.

SiN Episodes : Emergence (2006) ****

Now, this was fun! The new "Big Idea" is to release short, related games rather than major expansion packs - episodes. Valve are doing it for H-L2 and Ritual decided to revive the SiN franchise with three new episodes of which this is the first. This time it's using the H-L2 Source engine. We still have Blade vs. Elexis with JC back at base but this time Blade gets a rookie helper in the form of Jessica.

So, what makes this fun? Well, the Source engine allows a very interactive environment allowing you to tackle situations in lots of different ways. To me, it felt less linear than H-L2. The controls are few and straightforward, harking back to simpler days. And none the worse for it. There are real secrets to find. Not quite as testing as Painkiller but good enough. It has an extensive stats system to check that you've found all those secrets, smashed all those supply crates etc. Most interestingly, it has a difficulty system which allows you to choose the levels of "Challenge" and "Help" you want and then the game monitors your play to make sure it's testing but achievable. Excellent.

The only bad point is that it's short but that's implicit in the "Episode" moniker. It made up for this with lots of replay value and there aren't many games I replay more than once yet alone 3 or 4 times. Also, downloaded from Steam, it only cost £11.50 which is about a third of a top class 'full' game at time of writing. I hope they can keep this up for the next episode.

EDIT: It's a great shame, but Ritual hit cash flow problems and were taken over. There are no plans to continue the series.

Half-Life 2 : Episode 1 (2006) **½**

Another "episode", this time in the Half-Life universe. This picks up shortly after the end of Half-Life 2. Gordon Freeman and Alyx had just blown up the Combine building. As the episode opens, we learn a little more about how they were spirited away, surviving the carnage they had caused. The rest of the game chronicles their escape from City 17 before the reactor core in the Combine building explodes and wipes it off the face of the Earth.

So how was it? Quite brilliant. There were all the things that makes H-L great, crammed into this short bit of game play. Sure there's the occasional all-out fire fight but most of the time your figuring out the best way to tackle problems rather than just blasting. There's great interaction with non-player characters, especially Alyx who's with you most of the time. But Barney crops up as well. And there's a great public broadcast from Dr. Kleiner that makes me feel good about my own public speaking skills. However, it did dawn on me that this is probably the first resistance movement lead by scientists!

Why not 5*'s. Well, there's no vehicles (unless you count Dog throwing you across a chasm in a wrecked car!) and it is, by definition, short. I don't know how I'm going to tackle these 'episodes' yet. Perhaps I'll re-review them at the end, as one game. In which case, 5*'s is a distinct possibility. Great game.

Unreal (2006) **½**

Yes, **THE** Unreal. I was berated (in the nicest possible way) on a games forum for never having played this classic game. I must admit that I hadn't realised that it had such a strong single player element. I always associated it with Unreal Tournament and thought it was just another Quake 3 - mainly for MP'ers. I was wrong.

You come-to in a crashed spaceship being used to transport you and other prisoners to a penal planet. There are no obvious survivors on the ship. You stagger out onto a strange world. You soon find that the planet, Na Pali, has been invaded and occupied. The peaceful Nali have now been enslaved by the occupying, and particularly unpleasant, Skaarj who are using them to mine the planet's minerals. Your only chance is to find a Skaarj ship and get off the planet.

It was originally released in 1998. Consequently, the graphics and sounds feel old by modern standards. That said, the developers did a tremendous job with the tools they had and it's clear why this was so impressive in its time. Map design is excellent. In particular, the maps of buildings built by the Nali are pure fantasy and are brilliantly complicated to navigate. I frequently found myself making notes and drawing diagrams to make sure I'd covered everywhere. You get a nice selection of 12 weapons each with an alternate fire. Quite frankly, they are as good as any of the 'ordinary' weapons in more modern games (Grav Gun, in H-L2, and Painkiller excepted). Although there's no co-op play, there is the nice touch that if you help

a Nali, they will often show you a secret place with goodies. As well as weapons, you can collect and use as required power-ups such as invisibility or equipment like a force field. It handles darkness very well. You have flares, for one-off illumination, flashlights with limited battery life and, eventually a spotlight which is vital in a section when you've just taken out the main power source. ID could learn a lot from this before Doom 4!

Of its time but it was no hardship playing it 'today'. The rating reflects where I'd place it even against the most modern games (eat your heart out Doom 3!).

Prey (2006)*½**

I'm in two minds about this game. It almost got 4* but not quite. You are Tommy, a Cherokee Indian back on the modern-day reservation, after a time in the army, and hating it. Things get weird when a giant sphere appears in Earth's orbit and starts scooping up large chunks of North America. This includes the roadhouse in which you start the game. Why this is happening becomes clear as things progress. Your first objective is saving your girlfriend and grandfather but it gets more complicated ...

The game has three USPs (is that possible?). Firstly, gravity means little within the sphere and you can find yourself walking "up-side-down" or around walls. There are small planetoids that have their own gravity. You can even change gravity in an area so floors become ceilings. This is all very well done. Secondly, the game uses portals, that is a two-dimensional entranceway into another area. The enemy can also make them materialise to surprise you. Portals are about to become very big in gaming with the soon to be released "Portal" from Valve. However, in Prey you can't create your own portals, just use the ones in place. Lastly, Tommy finds he has the power to "spirit walk", where his spirit leaves his body and can often go to places not accessible by his physical form.

Putting all these together allows for some very good puzzles, as you twist gravity and spirit walk over chasms. The designers emphasised this aspect and the general cinematic nature of the game. But it remains a 'shooter' and here it falls down. Tommy finds some lovely 'organic' weapons as he progresses but fights are just too easy. This is compounded by only the single difficulty level available on your first time through. I believe the game also tries to adjust to your ability (like SiN Episodes). I'm not the greatest gunner but even I stormed through the first 75% of the game. There are loads of ammo and health available and you can't die! If you die you go to the Spirit World, play a mini-game and then return with a level of health restored. This smacks of console gaming and, no surprise, it was released on console simultaneously with the PC version.

Even though it does get a bit tougher towards the end, the easy battles make it a very short game and once you've got over the USPs there is no great re-play value. So, I very much enjoyed the strange environment, the puzzle design and the level design but was very disappointed with it as a 'shooter'. So, not quite the 4* but I'll be buying the sequel.

Star Trek Elite Force 2 (2006) *½**

Originally released in 2003, I bought it as a fill-in after running out of all the other shooters currently available. It follows on from the original (see above) but if that was a TV episode, this is the movie. It's much longer, more complex and tougher than its predecessor. Munro helps get Voyager home and after a brief spell of boredom at Starfleet Academy, joins Jean-Luc Picard's Enterprise. A jolly good plot follows.

Like the original, it's built on the Quake 3 engine, albeit heavily modified. The graphics are clearly not up to Source standards but that quite suits the, almost comic book, Star Trek world. It is a harder game than the first. There are some tough fights for those who like gun 'n' run. There are also some fun puzzles to be solved with your Tricorder. Since this was a Ritual game, there are a huge number of secrets to find, many as mad as Painkiller's.

I have a few dislikes. The plot is 'busy' and a lot of cut scenes are used to move things along. It doesn't feel as bad as the first game, probably because there's more to do in between, but my preference remains with the cinematic "Half-Life" approach. Also, a number of set pieces are against the clock. A reasonable enough, and perhaps realistic, device but I just don't enjoy that sort of challenge.

I'm glad I played it and it had some good moments but not a great game. If they ever do EF3, I suspect I'll buy that as a fill in one day, as well.

F.E.A.R. - Extraction Point (2006) *½**

This is the expansion pack for the original F.E.A.R. It picks up exactly where the first game ended with your

helicopter being brought down over the city. The city seems eerily quiet. Where have all the people gone? And why is Fettel still alive. Didn't you kill him? So, off you go again.

As an expansion, the game gives you much the same as the first. The main difference is that the game engine has been enhanced for the world to be a bit more interactive. You can push a few things around and 'structural damage' can occur if you, or your opponents, apply enough force. Still not in the same class as either the Painkiller or Source engines. Otherwise, business as usual with intense fire fights interspersed with scripted spooky scenes. In fact, I thought this was more 'shocking' than the original with some very disturbing incidents (watch out for Holiday's 'encounter' in the warehouse). It remains a one-note game but I enjoyed that note as least as much this time around, if not a bit more. If you liked FEAR, you'll like this.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. : Shadow of Chernobyl (2007) ****

My first game of 2007. It's May as I write this. There was a dearth of shooters at the beginning of the year but STALKER makes up for it, to some extent.

Another explosion at the Chernobyl NPP has lead to an irradiated area around it known as the Zone. The strange anomalies created by the radiation form strange and desirable artefacts, worth enough to tempt people to brave this hostile environment to 'harvest' them. These desperate folk have become known as Stalkers. Oh! There's also talk of a mysterious "Wish Granter" in the heart of the old power plant but that's probably just myth ...

You play the part of a Stalker found at a truck crash site just outside the zone. You were obviously once a Stalker as you have "S.T.A.L.K.E.R." tattooed on your arm. Consequently, you are nicknamed "Marked One". Beyond that you can remember nothing but in your PDA is a single message to "Kill Strelak".

STALKER is set around the Zone. It gives you large areas to explore of the type more often found in RPGs. There is a core storyline but you don't have to follow it. There are plenty of people to meet, many of whom can give you tasks to take you off the beaten track. Therefore, there is a multitude of possible endings. Many more than Deus Ex. Like that old favourite, you have an inventory to manage and a limit to how much you can carry and how many weapons you have readied. These weapons are quite realistic and very satisfying, from a choice of pistols, SMGs, assault rifles and sniper rifles. The possibilities for sniping in this game are as good as Far Cry. "Armour" varies from padded jackets for rookie Stalkers, environment suits (to cope with ever-present radiation) and stronger military suits. All in all, you are far from invulnerable and going in guns blazing can mean a quick death.

The 'things' that can kill you are manifold. There's the Military (who are supposed to guard the zone), other Stalkers (but only if you're aggressive), the Factions (militia groupings of Stalkers) and Bandits (who would rather steal artefacts than collect them). That's just the humans. The place is also plagued by mutants caused by the radiation. These vary from mutated dogs through brain-frazzled zombies to more horrible things which may have been human once. And, of course there is radiation and radioactive anomalies to cope with. The anomalies can be near invisible, as is the radiation, but all Stalkers carry Geiger counters to help them survive. If you do get a dose, then there's anti-radiation drugs or just a slug of vodka to get you through!

All in all an excellent mix of exploration, stealth, sniping and fire fights but it has a few problems. The game was in development a long time and was obviously meant to be even bigger. At the point the developers decided to get it out of the door, it was still quite buggy. The same person can be called a number of different names, some tasks can't be completed successfully, even the occasional crash to desktop (but no worse on my PC). It's already had 2 major patches released. This haste also shows in the game play. They implemented the need to eat but not to sleep. You just keep going 24/7, which jars. Since you're moving all the time, they never let night get really dark, more like the glow of a city rather than the pitch black of isolated countryside. Stealth missions at night would have been brilliant. The main storyline would have graced a more linear shooter but a large part of the game is doing the side missions. In a fantasy RPG you'd probably be doing 'quests' for a special item or magic armour or the like, something you couldn't get normally. In STALKER, all you tend to get is money and you can't buy much that is really special. If I could have bought a sniper rifle earlier in the game, I would have taken all sorts of missions to earn the money for one. There is a tendency to think "why bother".

So, a good game as it stands but one that could have been even better.

Bioshock (2007) **½**

Only the second decent new shooter of 2007 (ignoring assorted "Halo"s) but very well worth waiting for. You start off in a plane crash over an ocean. You swim through the wreckage to find a small lighthouse but no land nearby. You find a bathysphere and get taken down to the undersea city of Rapture. This city was founded in the 1930s/40's by a rich businessman wanting to create a place where the individual survives by their own endeavours unencumbered by God or State. Free Market or Anarchy? Actually, Madness.

The first thing that hits you is the quite extraordinary graphics. I upgraded my PC for this game and it was genuinely worth it. Your ride down to Rapture is breathtaking. An opening even better than the original Half-Life (high praise).

The Art Deco feel is carried through the whole city perfectly. Every area feels slightly different. I'm sure textures were reused but the impression is of each area being unique. You constantly get different and detailed views of the city from windows and glass passageways, not to mention shoals of fish swimming by. In keeping with this, there is much music of the period playing, obviously imported by the inhabitants as they arrived. Hearing "How Much is that Doggie in the Window" playing as you battle for your life is wonderful. All in all, the atmosphere is unique and convincing.

Many scientists working on the unacceptable on land have found their way to Rapture where there are no moral boundaries. Although the architecture and design is firmly Art Deco, there have been many scientific discoveries beyond, but parallel to, those "top side". The most important of these is the biological and genetic advances that allow people to enhance themselves with all sorts of "super" powers. Two problems. Firstly, genetic enhancement, "gene splicing", is addictive and, secondly, do too much and you end up mad. You find yourself caught up in a power struggle between two powerful individuals to control Rapture. In this they are aided by the remaining residents, who are now genetically altered beyond humanity and quite mad - Splicers. The Splicers are brilliantly voiced and sound genuinely disturbed and disturbing.

Finally, also roaming the buildings of Rapture are small girls, the Little Sisters, and their protectors, huge, heavily armed brutes in diving suits, the Big Daddies. Neither will bother you unless you bother them. Unfortunately, the Little Sisters harvest Adam, the substance that allows you to splice and increase your powers. So, you need to get at the Little Sisters which means you have to deal with their Big Daddies! How you treat these Little Sisters affects the ending of the game.

So, how does it play? Well, it was designed by the same man who gave us the brilliant System Shock 2 and it immediately feels like it. You will find weapons, hack turrets, genetically enhance yourself, collect objects to help you and research people and things to deal with them more effectively. However, in SS2 it was a serious and slow slog with the emphasis on the RPG aspects. Here it's all simplified with minimal inventory management and genetic upgrades freely available. Instead, it puts more emphasis on being a shooter. This threw a lot of people who were expecting "SS3". Weapons are gained quickly, ammo is very plentiful as are health stations and first aid kits. Between guns, genetic enhancements, hackable turrets and a flammable/explosive environment, there are loads of ways to finish off the opposition. That said, Splicers are tough and fast and can kill you quite easily if you're not careful. Similarly, Big Daddy fights are always episodes to be planned if you want to stay healthy.

So why isn't this the H-L2 beater? Well, I played at the recommended "Medium" difficulty and found ammo and health too plentiful to present a challenge for most of the time. There are very few puzzles. This is a shame, given the range of genetic powers that can be acquired. Similarly, there were few things that were hard to find or do. Need a code for a door - it's nearby somewhere. The map shows you everything, so there are no 'secrets' to discover. In fact, an annoyance was the invisible walls throughout the maps stopping you from getting to interesting looking places. Finally, the "end boss" battle was so easy that even I did it on my second try. In summary, it wanted to be less of an RPG and more of a shooter than System Shock 2 but didn't go far enough. I felt that it fell between the two stools.

That said, it was still great fun to play and presented the most beautifully conceived and realised environment in any game to date. It just needed that little bit more to be the best.

Half-Life 2: Episode 2 (2007) **½**

The much delayed second episode but well worth waiting for. The story continues with Gordon and Alyx surviving the Citadel explosion and subsequent train wreck of Ep1 and trying to get the coded information Alyx gathered from the Citadel to the Resistance base in the White Forest. Our Resistance scientists have got hold of an old rocket that might just be launchable. Combine this with Alyx's coded information and the

Combine portal could be shut down.

The only reason this didn't get 5*'s is the short length. The game play is brilliant. There is constant puzzle solving. You get an old, reinforced wreck of a car to drive around much larger game areas than any H-L game before. The set piece battles are hard but exciting and rewarding. A new opponent is introduced in the form of the Hunters. Fast, tough and clever. That was me in trouble, then! They really were hard to beat. At one point I ended up emptying the Magnum into one at point blank range, finally finishing it off. I found myself saying "Eat that, Pig Face". I mean, they're pixels for Heaven's sake! The final battle against Striders and packs of Hunters is probably the best "boss" battle I've ever played.

Backing all this up is a great storyline. Alyx is hurt by a Hunter and you need to work with Vortigaunts to heal her. You have a run in with the very powerful Combine Advisors. The G-Man has a mysterious word and it becomes clear that he also has some involvement with Alyx and her father, Eli. Dog makes a dramatic return. Dr. Magnusson, from Black Mesa, is leading on the rocket launch and is a royal, pain -in-the-rear! Judith makes a significant discovery in the Arctic. And the story ends with the death of Eli. Phew! Not bad for an "episode".

Valve have added a "developer's commentary" as an extra after you beat the game the first time. It was clear from this that they have been putting a lot of effort into the storyline and cinematic presentation of it. This is closer to being in a film than any game before it.

PCZone only gave this a rating of 82%, saying it's just more of the same. I think they missed the point. An absolute classic bit of gaming as far as I'm concerned.

Portal (2007) ****

I'm not sure if I should include this here or not. It was part of the Orange Box, along with H-L2:Ep2, and generated excellent reviews. However, you never shoot anyone and you don't really have a gun. So, is it a FPS?

Anyway, you wake up in a 'living unit' in the Aperture Science Laboratories. Your task seems to be to complete a training course in using a "Portal Gun". Portals are the same concept that featured in "Prey". That is, you enter one of a portal pair and exit wherever the other one of the pair is placed. In Prey these were fixed but in Portal, the Gun lets you place them wherever you want them, more or less. The training course consists of a number of more and more complex puzzles solved using the Gun. You don't meet another human but are guided through the course by an unreliable and increasingly demented computer. Just as you finish the last test ... well, play the game and find out.

The puzzles are brilliant, the scripting of GLaDOS, the computer, is hilarious, surreal and frequently scary and the ending is probably unique. It's a puzzle game more than a Shooter, and short with it, so it gets 4*s, here. As a puzzle game, it's 5*s without a doubt. Play it!

Painkiller:Overdose (2007)*½**

Although Dreamcatcher, the producers of Painkiller, had been very quiet since BooH, a professional development team, Mindware, loved the game so much that they started to produce a "community mod". This became so extensive and original that DC picked it up and distributed it as an official part of the Painkiller franchise. In the game you play Belial, half angel, half demon, released from imprisonment when Daniel Garner killed Lucifer. He's out for revenge on those who took away his wings and incarcerated him for millennia. And, let's face it, Painkiller gives you the arsenal to do it!

There were huge plusses and minuses for this game. On the plus side, the level design, new and restyled weapons and new Demons were outstanding. The whole thing hung together extremely well. On the downside, being PK fans, Mindware did make it VERY hard. The real PK aficionados were having trouble with it, yet alone anyone who had bought it as a stand-alone game. They had also pushed the underlying PK engine to its limit and the load times were excessive on small to medium powered PCs. Given all of that, I still enjoyed it but I'm a big PK fan. I wouldn't necessarily recommend it to anyone without PK experience.

Crysis (2008) ****

The other game I upgraded my PC for, besides Bioshock. On the graphics front it absolutely did not disappoint. I'd say they were better than Bioshock and yet another step closer to photo-realism. However, the gameplay was a bit of a curate's egg with some quite brilliant bits but other sections that were positively

tedious. So, to the game. The North Koreans have invaded a Pacific island shortly after an American archaeological team report some extraordinary finds. So, in you go with your Special Forces compatriots to get them out. It turns out that the 'find' was an alien structure inside a mountain and it's waking up.

There's only 5 of you for the covert operation but you're aided by the latest nanosuit. This is an exoskeletal armour that gives you protection and healing. It can boost your speed and strength and can also make you close to invisible. However, it can only do one of these things at any one time and they drain your suit's power at varying rates. You're also given decent weapons up front. I've always hated the scenario when you're supposed to be a super-soldier but have to find your weapons as you go! Both suit and weapons work very well.

The game starts with you vs. the Koreans. These sections are sneak'n'snipe heaven. Even with your super-armour, going in guns blazing will probably get you killed very quickly. However, using cover, moving prone and turning on the armour's cloak when needed will get you through most situations. In fact, the cloaking option was almost too powerful, even getting me out of fire-fights. As well as precision (i.e. sniper) rifles, you also get an excellent sight for your assault rifle. My tactic was always to find a high place, stick the silencer on the assault rifle and take them down with headshots. Excellent! Despite otherwise good AI, the Koreans would never throw a grenade upwards to flush you out!

However, once you have to face the aliens, forget subtlety. Even the minor aliens are tough and dangerous. Once you face the larger versions, look to missile launchers, mini-guns and Gauss rifles. You definitely felt outclassed by the aliens, which was a good thing. The final "boss" battle on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier genuinely felt desperate and overwhelming.

Like Far Cry, you have a whole island to explore though you are normally contained within a particular section at any one time. However, you are free to roam that section as you will. The environment is highly interactive. You can pick up most things. Shacks fall to pieces under heavy fire and trees can be knocked down or have bits blown off. Later, you find yourself inside the alien structure which was not particularly awe-inspiring. Better, though, is that the aliens prefer a cold environment and freeze swathes of the island as they expand out from the mountain. This was very well done and a good contrast.

What let it down? The vehicles were as unusable as in Far Cry. I ignored them whenever possible, except to use them as stationary machine gun posts. Worse still, they would explode when they took too much damage, killing you instantly. Unfortunately two episodes force you to use vehicles - a tank and a VTOL (helicopter). The latter handled like a slug with a propeller. These sections were just a frustrating slog.

The section in the alien structure was also a let-down. The architecture was not very imaginative and the zero-gravity thing has been done before. Providing you're careful not to disturb the awakening residents, they would tend to ignore you. I suppose it was supposed to be a puzzle section but it wasn't very hard finding your way out.

Finally, it was very short. From reviews, I was expecting the Korean battles to be about a third of the game and alien skirmishes to be the rest. In fact, the early battles were more like two thirds and the game finished much more quickly than I expected once the aliens were loose. So the three sections I positively disliked were a substantial part of the game. For these reasons, only the 4 stars.

Clive Barker's Jericho (2008)½**

Another plot line from Clive Barker (see "Undying"). The Jericho Team are a military squad with assorted psychic powers. They tackle those supernatural situations outside the abilities of the normal military. A rift in normality has appeared in a desert in the Middle East. The team are sent in to close it but soon find out it is caused by the re-appearance of "The Firstborn", the first creature created by God before humanity. God considered it too powerful and banished it to another plane but every now and then it tries to breakthrough to claim its inheritance - Earth.

You lead a six-person squad, all favouring different weapons and with different psychic abilities. The plot twist is that you "die" quite early in the game but remain as a non-corporeal entity able to inhabit the bodies of the team. Consequently, you get to play all of the characters and use all their abilities at one time or another. A really clever idea but ...

What a missed opportunity. Moving between different characters was very well implemented and good fun. The storyline was original, if not "deep". The game chucks plenty of enemies at you, which leads to some really intense fire fights. The environments are well designed but that's where it starts to go wrong.

There's no ability to 'jump'. Sometimes you can't get over the tiniest ledge and there are invisible walls everywhere. So you can't really make use of what's around you. There's also no reason to explore these very spectacular environments because there's nothing to find - no ammo, no power-ups or whatever. You're just channelled through the maps, which leads to a very boring level design.

I have no objections to console ports but many aspects of the game really grated. I'll put up with the lack of a quick save option but some of the fights are genuinely tough and checkpoints are often few and far between. The repetition gets monotonous. There are also scripted sections called "survival events". Here you have to follow a sequence displayed on the screen with the cursor keys. You just replay the same bit 'til you get it right. Finally, there's a rather lame reason for you being supplied with all the ammo you need, so you can just let loose without any tactics or strategy to preserve resources. This may amuse the console player but is not what I play a PC game for.

Finally, you are dependent on the rest of the team. In something like Half-Life 2, you could basically manage on your own. The NPCs add a little extra firepower but they're disposable. In Jericho, you won't survive without keeping everyone alive and kicking. The AI just isn't up to it. Their main tactic is to stand up and fire endless amounts of ammo. Even if you fall back, they won't follow you. Consequently they are incapacitated much of the time. Again, very frustrating and it leads to unnecessary repetition.

Thankfully, this wasn't a long game. I do like to finish what I start, so this was mercifully short. It just drags in above a poor 2*'s because moving between characters is a lot of fun. Don't spend money on it, though.

F.E.A.R. - Perseus Mandate (2008) ***

The second expansion pack. It got some fairly awful reviews in the games "press". I think the general view was that Vivendi were squeezing the last few pieces of silver out of an aging franchise. This may be true but it still has some good things going for it.

Firstly, the bad things. The graphics design is very plain, not to say boring. Every sewer, basement, warehouse, office looks like every other sewer, basement etc. Timeshift took on development duties and they probably introduced a few new 'textures' but I recognised much taken from the first two games. I know corridors are going to look the same in any office, lab or whatever but many felt like a cut'n'paste jobs. You're also guided strictly through the appropriate areas. The action takes place in the same time frame as the first two games but with a different squad, one of whom just happens to be as super-fast as the protagonist in the original game. Hmm. At first I thought it was going to be an oversized mod. However ...

I reckon that Timeshift sat down and designed areas to create good environments for fire fights. Let's face it, that's one of the main attractions if you enjoy FEAR. It's absolutely true that they, then, didn't make things very pretty but that doesn't detract from "fun with a gun". They've introduced a new class of enemy, the tough Nightcrawler Mercenaries. There's also a new scoped assault rifle (brilliant), a grenade 'lobber' (ok in the right circumstances) and an electro-thingy (rubbish). The requisite nightmare section is suitably spooky and a crawl through a dimly-lit, derelict subway was very tense, thanks to the return of our almost-invisible, red-eyed 'friends'.

I liked the way it was tied into events in the original game. It starts with you versus Replicants and Armacham security. Suddenly, you're caught up in the explosion from the end of the original game. After that, the spookier creatures from the first expansion pack start to appear. You can even guess why 'you' have similar powers to the original FEAR character.

If you like FEAR, I reckon you'll like this but I wouldn't recommend it as your first experience of the franchise. I enjoyed it for what it was.

Blacksite:Area 51 (2008) **

This is a very loose follow-up to the original "Area 51" (see previously). You find yourself as a special forces marine, initially in Iraq looking for WMD but finding something very different. The action then moves in time and geography to, the now deserted, Area 51 where you are involved in cleaning up the subsequent mess.

This has the potential of being quite a good game but they didn't really finish it. I liked the storyline, the cut scenes and the voice acting was well up to par. There was only one type of vehicle to drive but it used the Halo system of 3rd person view but 1st person controls and was thoroughly enjoyable.

But when you install a game and it refuses to remember your video settings, you've got to wonder. It was fractionally better after a patch but the AI of the supporting characters was seriously flawed in a number of parts of the game, sometimes leading to you having to replay quite large sections. This was particularly irksome as it was a console port with the dreaded checkpoint-only save system. After checkpoints, you might suddenly find yourself with different weapons, losing that nice shotgun you had ammo'ed up. It also had a morale system which was supposed to affect your squad. It seemed completely haphazard as to how you generated high or low morale. A series of sniped headshots produced low morale but running around like an idiot ineffectively discharging loads of machine gun ammo seemed to promote high morale. In either case it didn't seem to affect the gameplay much. Finally, it was very short, which, in the circumstances, may have been a good thing. Another indication that there was supposed to be more and better. I'd give it a miss.

TimeShift (2008) ****

This got middling reviews in the press. The general view was that it was quite derivative. This is true. You can identify lots of bits "borrowed" from other games. However, all these bits are put together very well, plus you get the ability to muck about with time.

You're involved in a secret government project involving time travel. Two suits have been developed to allow humans to withstand the rigours of time travel. The first was the Alpha suit. The second, still under development, was the Beta suit. The lead (mad!) scientist, Krone, has stolen and used the Alpha suit to go back in time and laid explosives in the Lab so no one can follow him. You get the Beta suit just before the Lab goes up. You arrive in a parallel time stream in which Krone has made himself dictator and plunged society into civil war. Since your suit can't take you back to your original 'present', you'll have to find Krone both to stop him and gain access to the Alpha suit to make your return trip.

The suit gives you healing and a level of protection in combat but not too much. This is a good thing. The graphics aren't cutting edge but they're fine. The environments vary from war-torn city through mountains and countryside to warehouses and factories. The weapons are very good, especially for sniping. The vehicle is a quad bike borrowed from NOLF but that's no bad thing. It's better to drive than anything in Crysis! At this point you've got a good-to-average shooter but then there's time shifting.

Your suit gives you the power to slow, stop and reverse time for short periods. This is so much fun. It's invaluable for you to survive many of the combat situations. The game also faces you with puzzles to be solved using time. These were mainly straightforward but a few really made me stop and think. Overall, the gameplay felt like a cross between Half-Life 2 and FEAR.

This game doesn't push the boundaries of the FPS like H-L2, Crysis or BioShock but it is enormously good fun to play. Truth to tell, I enjoyed this much more than Crysis. The ending set it up for a sequel. I hope it happens because I'd definitely buy it.

Team Fortress 2 (2008) n/a

This document is about single player first person shooters so what's this doing here? It came as part of The Orange Box and soon gained the reputation as the most fun, on-line, multiplayer, team game ever. What made me think of trying it was the character classes. As well as the fast-shooting, attack classes, there are classes for defence and support. This gives options for the slow and old (like me). I've been majoring as a Doctor (healing the attackers in the front line), an Engineer (building strategically placed turrets, dispensers and transporters), Heavies (slow as heck but with a devastating chain gun) and, if I must attack, a Soldier (with a rocket gun, so aiming is not so important).

You find a server, join the game, join one side or the other (Red or Blu (sic)), chose your class and away you go. Good players, who play together a lot, can apply some tactics but there's always a place for some cannon fodder to just have some fun in the chaos. However, it's important to find a friendly server with a low latency. If you find yourself amongst a load of twitchy kids abusing you for your lack of skill, it's off-putting to say the least. Similarly, if you miss every shot because you're lagging behind the action, it's no fun.

So, I've included this review because it's the perfect introduction to MP gaming for the SP gamer.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. : Clear Sky (2008) *½**

This is a prequel to SoC. It's set in a time when major "emissions" are changing and distorting the Zone. Most people will die if caught in one of these emissions but the character you play seems to be able to

survive them. Unfortunately each episode slowly destroys your nervous system. The Clear Sky faction believe the increased emissions are being caused by a Stalker, Strelok, who has managed to breach the brain scorcher and is planning to get into CNPP itself. You better get after him, then.

CS is SoC on steroids. Night is pitch black, not the previous twilight. Artefacts are much harder and more dangerous to gather. Mutants are really dangerous, doing a lot of damage and are harder to kill. Human opponents are at least as tough but probably tougher. Basically, if you take a hit you start to bleed to death. Weapons and armour degrade with use but you can now pay to have them repaired and upgraded. None of these are bad things and feel more "realistic" than SoC. You have the same map as SoC but with new areas opened up or added. It's amusing to go back to an area you know to find it in different circumstances. All in all, the game sucked me in and I was really enjoying it but ...

The initial release was buggy to the point of unplayable. It took 5 patches to get it to the state it should have been on release but I persevered. Nights were dark but they didn't include a "sleep" option. I used a mod for this. The need to eat seemed to have been turned off. The only use for foodstuffs seemed to be to give a small health boost. Much was made of the "wars" between different factions and how this altered the game. Although there was an extension of the PDA to reflect this, it didn't seem to be implemented in any noticeable way. Again, I could live with this.

Then you get to Limansk. At this point the game becomes an on-the-rails shooter. You can't double back. There's no more trading and no more artefacts. It was also obvious that there should have been more. At least a section in Pripyat Underground and a longer chase through CNPP. Instead, you get to CNPP directly from Limansk and then play what is effectively a mini-game of sniping Strelok to finish it. This was a huge disappointment.

I loved the game play up to Limansk and would have rated this better than SoC if that had continued, even with its bugs and limitations. However, the ending was so poor and un-STALKER-like that I have to mark it down. It was almost reduced to 3* but the opening sections were great fun.

There seems to have been a spate of "unfinished" games lately. I'm sure the commercial pressures to release on schedule are huge but it's a shame developers aren't allowed to adopt the Valve approach of "it's done, when it's done and it's perfect". Clear Sky could have been perfect in 6 months time but not as released.

Crysis: Warhead (2008) *½**

An "episode" for the original Crysis. It follows Psycho on his missions when he wasn't accompanying Nomad in the original. The Koreans have discovered some kind of alien weapon and are trying to get it back to the mainland to "reverse-engineer" it. Psycho's job is to stop them. So, what was it like.

Thankfully, the developers realised that Psycho was one of the most annoying sidekicks ever to grace a game. In Warhead they make him much more likeable and give him a bit of history. This worked very well.

You get most of the elements of the original game but much improved. There's no "inside the alien craft" which automatically rates as an improvement. Vehicles seemed to be more responsive and although I didn't use them much, I did from time to time. The sections which forced you to use a vehicle were fine. Nothing like as tedious as the Tank and VTOL in Crysis. I'm told that it also ran better on lower spec PCs but I didn't have any trouble with the original. So why's it scoring less than its forbear?

It's short. It was priced that way but even compared to the H-L2 or SiN episodes, it was very short. To get over this, the devs used a lot of extensive cut scenes. They were well done but many could have been fun to "play" through. Certainly duking it out with your nano-suited Korean arch-enemy would have been satisfying. Also, some sections were too easy. There's a couple of train rides where you're clearly supposed to grab a mounted gun and shoot all the opposition. The first run was a piece of cake and the second by-passed completely by hiding amongst some containers! The final boss battle was completed by a mixture of running like a mad thing and then waiting, ducking and shooting. No pressure, compared to the finale of Crysis. These conspired to make the game feel even shorter.

PC Zone thought highly of this game and put it in their top ten. I'm not convinced at all but it was good enough fun.

Far Cry 2 (2009) ****1/2

This is not a direct follow-up to the original Far Cry but rather a game with the same look and feel but updated with the latest technologies. You are a mercenary sent into an imploding African country to kill "The Jackal" (not very original!), an arms dealer supplying both sides of their civil war. Stranded in the country, you have to survive until you can find a way to tackle your victim. Oh. And you've developed malaria with meds almost non-existent.

I gave this a good score despite many quirks, more of which later. First, the good stuff. It's a long game. I tried to do as many missions and find as many lost diamonds as possible and the excellent game statistics tell me it took me over 77 hours to complete! The graphics are outstanding, as good as I've seen in a game to date. It doesn't have the extraordinary art design of BioShock but the African vistas are stunning. Far better than Crysis in my opinion. To give you the best view, Crytek have designed a minimal HUD that only pops up as required, so you usually have an uncluttered screen. You have a large "sandbox" to explore and the missions you take on send you all over a large and varied map. To cover this ground, you get the best first person driving yet. You get vehicles like dune buggies, clapped out old cars, SUVs and armed jeeps. There are a variety of boats for the lakes and rivers. Even the dreaded hanglider can be mastered with a bit of practice. I don't know what they did to make them so usable. You get a good weapon selection right from the start and this gets even better as things progress. All tastes are catered for from scoped grenade launchers through to silent sniper rifles. Crytek have made a big thing of using fire in this game and it spreads in a very realistic manner. I must admit I didn't use it much, though. So, how you tackle a mission is down to your personal preference, which is a good thing.

Now the niggles. It was obviously built to be a console game and although still excellent on PC, it's obviously been dumbed-down. In no particular order.

Buy a weapon and you can just renew it at "weapon shops" for free. This jars on the realism front but also negates the weapon reliability thing. I just swapped out at every opportunity and hardly ever had weapon jams. You can pick up weapons from your victims but, except right at the start of the game, why bother? The "currency" is rough diamonds, local money being virtually worthless. A nice idea but once you find your favourite weapons there's zero expenditure. I ended the game with over 500 diamonds!

What should have been implemented was some kind of weapon repair system as in STALKER:CS with a cost to bring your weapon up to scratch. New weapons should have been rarer and much more expensive, so it would be worthwhile searching bodies and outposts.

Related to this, ammo is free at weapon shops and basically coming out of your ears all over the map. To run out of ammo, you would have to be a very bad shot indeed! Again, make it expensive to buy, so it's worth scavenging.

Similarly, health is plentiful and if you survive a fire fight, you know you're going to be back to full health in no time.

All of Africa hates you! Every checkpoint, outpost and patrol will attack you on sight. You can't choose to be neutral, as in STALKER. Consequently, the excellent driving is interrupted by endless fire fights. In many areas, I took to walking! Far better to be able to bribe a checkpoint to let you through, the down side being you couldn't raid their supplies. A good trade-off.

When you do take out a guard post, they respawn in no time. At one point, I cleared a road block, went a few hundred yards down the road, realised I had to double back and found it repopulated! Half a day or so would have been more realistic.

Finally, the mechanisms of the console save system are left in place but made redundant by the implementation of a PC save/quicksave system. This is basically a good thing but the quick save just makes an ordinary new save rather than over-writing a few slots for quicksaves only. Since you quicksave quite a lot to avoid the tedium of repeating long journeys, you build up a huge number of saves. I took to clearing them down before each game session.

This may seem like a lot of bad points but putting these right in the PC version would have made an excellent game even better. Cross this game with STALKER and it would have got 5*s. Even as it is, a very enjoyable game.

NecroVisioN (2009) **½**

I fell in love with this game, so much so that a Painkiller friend and I put up the fan-boy guide website. It was developed by The Farm 51, which includes many of the original Painkiller team. It's been labelled a WWI shooter. This is not quite true. You start out in the WW1 trenches but you're soon fighting the undead, going miles underground to the Vampire World and heading for the Gates of Hell.

It's 1916 and the middle of the Great War. You're Simon Bukner, an American volunteer to the British Army. The latest offensive has gone horribly wrong and you find yourself stuck in the German trenches to avoid the gas. It's hard enough taking on the Germans but things get seriously out of hand when the dead reanimate. It becomes apparent that you have been chosen by the ancient Vampire race to take the ShadowHand and close the Gates of Hell before its Hell spawn can burst onto the face of the Earth.

The game rewards you with "adrenaline" for carrying out a "combo". A combo is an attack or sequence of attacks, usually, though not exclusively, at close quarters. Adrenaline gives you the ability to go into slo-mo (a la FEAR) and in the later part of the game, powers the ShadowHand. Combos also add to your "Fury". In the grip of Fury, you do more damage and further combos give you a little health boost. Your Fury is limited at first but you can find Vampire artefacts that will increase it. The result is a benevolent feedback cycle. The higher your Fury the more damage you do and your Fury increases further. This mechanic means that even an old sniper like me ends up charging into a crowd of the undead shovel in hand and kicking in all directions. Liberating fun.

Half way through the game you gain the Shadow Hand. This is a gauntlet with a number of special attacks, powered by your adrenaline. It also has a retractable claw that can be used as a lethal melee weapon. You should have a high Fury level by now and with the ShadowHand things get seriously lethal. As your Fury builds your vision starts to blur and distort, the eponymous NecroVisioN. At this point your enemies might be blasted away from you, spontaneously combust or freeze in your presence. Again, huge fun.

Alongside the main story, "Challenge Rooms" become available after each Chapter. These normally present the challenge of carrying out some task (e.g., kill 50 Undead in 5 minutes with Pistol Head Shots) for a reward (e.g., always having the Rifle Scope). You don't have to do them but they are the only way to add certain powers to the ShadowHand. Of these, I must mention "Serious Uncle Sam" - kill 500 enemies in 15 minutes!

As well as these basics, the weapons are all good fun. In particular, dynamite, gas lamps and, even, bayonets can be thrown as well as doing their usual job. There are mech suits, which you can choose to use if you wish but aren't compulsory. You also get to ride a Dragon for some of the best flying in any FPS.

There are some problems. Load times can be long on less powerful PC's. The storyline is pretty dodgy, even by Painkiller standards. The voice acting of the English version (it's an Eastern European game) is iffy and sometimes inconsistent (i.e. the wrong voice!). The graphics are a love/hate thing. They don't attempt to be photo-realistic but some find them a bit "blurry". All the fire effects can also take their toll on the graphics card and I had to lower the settings in places.

But all the negatives are forgotten as you kick your opponent to its knees and take its head off with your shovel

F.E.A.R. 2 (2009) *½**

Alma's back! Another instalment in the FEAR saga. Since this was branded "2", I was expecting something special, something to take the franchise on. This really didn't happen. What you got was another part of the Alma tale with much better graphics than the original game but otherwise much of the same.

The high point was the improved graphics. They clearly took to heart all the comments about the repetitive nature of the environments in the originals. Here, everything is varied and realistic. I was impressed. You do get to use some mech armour and fire a fixed turret but neither was particularly inspiring. The game was nicely spooky and not as outrageously bloody as the original. I liked that. The weapons were good. They kept the scoped assault rifle from Perseus Mandate and that was all I needed much of the time. The Hammerhead replaced the Penetrator but wasn't quite as much fun. Otherwise, it was the same old FEAR gameplay, which is good but I was expecting more.

On the down side, it was obviously built with the console version in mind. So, the PC version got stuck with checkpoint-only saves. They were quite well placed but the effect was to drive you forward through the

game. Consequently, I finished the game in about a week. Given it was priced as a full game on release (£30) and not an expansion, I was expecting much more. Far Cry 2 and Crysis both took me 3-4 weeks. If I'd have bought it on release at full price I would have been very disappointed. However, a few months on, it was priced more like Extraction Point and Perseus Mandate. And that just about sums it up. A very pretty FEAR expansion pack.

Cryostasis (2009) *1/2**

What a weird but wonderful game. You are a Russian scientist sent to investigate the wreck of an old, ice-bound, nuclear ice breaker. You also have strong psychic abilities which allow you to get glimpses of the past, as you make your way around the ship, and even relive the last few minutes of corpses frozen on the ship. You can use these moments to change the future, that is - your present. For instance you are in a room that was flooded and, hence, now jammed with ice. You find a corpse, go back in "time" and manage to close the hatch that caused the flooding. You return to find the room ice free!

The gameplay is mainly about revealing the story and puzzle solving, more like an adventure game. However, there is some shooting to be had. The surviving occupants of the wreck seem to have been changed into cold-loving mutants or zombies. They dislike this warm body invading their "home". A nice touch is that you don't have health points but your ability to survive fights depends on how warm you are. You are constantly on the look out for heat sources to survive. Just walking around the outer decks in the raging blizzard can kill you from cold. On which, you die easily in this game, on a par with System Shock 2. You do not want to take on the opposition head on.

Even having completed the game, I'm not quite sure what it was all about. A bit like a David Lynch movie. However, I found it a fascinating game to play and would recommend it to anyone looking for something different.

Fallout 3 (2009) **1/2**

Nuclear war finally happened. 200 years later, you and your father, a doctor, live in a "Vault" protected from whatever remains outside in an underground community that knows no different. That is, until Dad breaks out leaving you, and a level of chaos, behind. You set out on his trail to find out why he walked out on you. And so you emerge from the confines of Vault 101 into what remains of Washington DC.

This is the first open-world RPG-style game I've played. System Shock 2, Deus Ex and BioShock all had RPG elements. STALKER and Far Cry 2 presented open worlds with optional missions. However, I'd never played the combined genre before. That said, it has an excellent first person view and there is plenty of shooting to be had.

The first thing I learnt was that the success of what you do depends on your level and statistics as much as your physical involvement in the game. As an ex-D&D player, I didn't have a lot of trouble with this but it did come as a bit of a shock when, what I thought were, perfect shots missed. That said, you do have a facility called VATS, bestowed on you by technology from your Vault, which allows time to freeze and you to try and make your perfect shot. This jarred a bit, at first, but you get to use it like slo-mo in FEAR. It compensates for the stats-driven shooting. It also gives you a lovely slow motion, cinematic view of your kills. You get used to it.

You get a very wide selection of weapons from a BB gun to a device that lobbs mini nuclear bombs! Sadly, the weakest weapon is the one that is normally my favourite - the sniper rifle. It is hugely inaccurate compared to sniper rifles in other games, with or without VATS. It would be a very powerful weapon if they hadn't have done that, I suppose, but I'd have much rather they'd just made the ammo scarcer.

The second thing I learned was that the main mission (i.e. storyline) is relatively short and will not prompt you to explore even 30% of the map. I accidentally finished the game with the vast majority unexplored. Fortunately, I had made frequent saves, so I doubled back with the intention of finding as much as possible. And there is a lot to find. I played for 121 hours and I know I didn't find everything as this depends partly on the decisions you make as you play.

I have a few other gripes. Sleeping, eating and drinking aren't enforced, so you can just keep on going using med packs to keep your health up. Nights are a kind of twilight rather than the pitch black they would be. And the ending, when you trigger it, is irrational and jars with the relatively realistic nature of the game. None of these had a big impact on gameplay.

This is a game I will definitely return to when there are no new FPSs about. Choose to play a different way and it will be a very different experience. Thoroughly enjoyed and deserving of its high score.

Wolfenstein (2009) ****

The next entry in the Wolfenstein canon (see the very start of this document). This time our hero is dispatched to the occupied town of Isenstadt after finding a strange amulet in the opening cut-scene, which was very good incidentally. It seems the town is built on the remains of an ancient civilization, the Thule, who discovered the secrets of a parallel dimension - The Veil. It seems the Thule were destroyed by their attempts to harness the power of The Veil. The Nazis think they can do better ...

The game got very middling reviews from the press. It doesn't take FPSs any further on but I found it a very enjoyable play. The streets of Isenstadt act as a hub leading to missions inside and outside the town. You can avoid Nazi patrols by taking to the roofs or the sewers. Inside the town, you have contacts with the resistance, a secret society and the black marketeers. On every mission you can find intelligence (which will help with the mission), gold (with which you can buy weapon and power upgrades from the black market) and mystical Tomes (which increase your Veil powers). Some of these are concealed as some very cunning "secrets".

You get a good mix of WWII weapons and "experimental" Veil weapons. The upgrade system works well and you can beef up the weapons of your choice. I developed a lethal sniper rifle and powerful assault rifle (as usual!) but you get rocket launchers, plasma cannons and other such exotica, if that's what you like.

Best of all are the "Veil Powers". You get hold of another of those amulets, that started your mission, and the crystals to activate it. This allows you to enter the Veil dimension for a short time. In which, you can move faster than in the normal world, slow the normal world down, protect yourself from the normal world or do more damage with your weapons to those in the normal world. These basic powers can be further upgraded through the game.

So what were the bad points? Only one as far as I'm concerned. Being a console port, it had no manual save facility and you had to rely on the dreaded checkpoint system. To be fair, it was pretty well implemented with only a few instances of me getting annoyed with replaying the same bit yet again. However, if you chose to reload an old checkpoint save, you lost all your saves after that. On lots of occasions I'd liked to have gone back and re-tried a section, especially to have a crack at finding more secrets but it would have been too much to replay lots of sections if I'd have failed. This is a great shame given how much fun "finding stuff" was.

I liked the graphics, I liked the cut scenes, the voice acting was good and the Boss battles were well pitched. I might well play this again, one day, just to find a few more of those Tomes ...

EDIT: I did play it again, one day and very good it was too. I made much more use of the Veil powers which kept the game fresh and I did, indeed, find more Tomes.

Painkiller: Resurrection (2009) *1/2**

I find it very hard to write this. I know one of the developers, a long time aficionado of the game and a top-class programmer. He fixed more faults in Overdose, for the community, than Mindware in their patches. A small software house, Homegrown, was given access to the PK IP and commissioned to make another game by Dreamcatcher/JoWood. They, in turn, got a number of the fan and modding community on board. Potentially, this could have been PK2 but the catalogue of problems that befell the development is a salutary lesson for any software team.

What emerged was a much smaller game than originally planned. Worse still, the publishers rushed it out before the developers had finished testing it and with multi-player virtually unfinished. Not that that mattered, since the publishers had a problem with GameSpy, who run the MP servers, and there was nowhere for people to play, anyway. So, the world was presented with an incomplete, buggy, scaled-down version of what they had been expecting. Little imagination is required to predict the fans' and reviewers' reactions.

So, why am I giving it a very respectable score? Well, the SP was virtually complete. A tad buggy but playable. It chronicles the story of "Wild" Bill Sherman. A contract killer who's bomb, underneath his victims' car, is about to explode just as a school bus pulls into the street. Bill tries to stop the bus but he, the children, and his intended victims are all killed. His story in Purgatory is told through the game as a graphic

novel. How his story ends depends on how you finish the game.

There were lots of good things in the game. All the original weapons were brought back plus a new one. There were only 6 levels but these were all huge, more like Varus's "Hills" than classic PK. The final level held 888 enemies. You get the idea. This took a little getting used to but, now, I would like to see it in any future PK game. All the levels were linked thematically and graphically. They had the medieval feel that I most associate with PK. The secrets were rock hard, perhaps tougher than the original game and, perhaps, too hard. On the other hand, the devs intended that it should be playable at Trauma by more than the usual nutters (me and other fanatics!) . There were lots of armour and health about. This was a relief after the madness of Overdose.

Getting the revised set of Tarot Cards was tough. Trauma became surprisingly easy. However, I chose the personal challenge of collecting all the souls. This was a real test because you had to cover every part of these large maps and kill carefully. It is possible and I thoroughly enjoyed doing it. I spent many fun hours on the game. Far more than some of the titles I've played recently. Since this is a personal and subjective view, I have no qualms in giving it a good score.

Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood (2010) **1½

I did not enjoy this game! I'll start at the beginning, though. This is a prequel to the original CoJ, which got somewhat middling reviews, so I gave it a miss. This game, however, got some good reviews and was considered a big improvement. It's part of that rare genre, the Wild West FPS. It tells the story of two brothers (three, actually, but read on), we first meet fighting for the Confederacy in the American Civil War, and their lives after the Union wins. It's an all-action, spaghetti western involving the bonds of family, the search for hidden gold and the love of a beautiful woman. John Ford would have recognised it.

It sounds good, doesn't it? And, indeed there are some very good things in there. The guns are the crude, C19th items and a breath of fresh air after the exotica of many of the games I've played lately. Special mention goes to the bow, which gives you a couple of seconds of slow-time as you aim. A silent, long-distance killer. The graphics are excellent. The parched deserts of the southern borders almost made me thirsty. The storyline was good and supported by both drawn and animated cut-scenes. The voice acting was pretty good, too. So, where does it all go wrong?

Let's start with the story and cut scenes. There's a lot of story to tell and so there are a lot of cut scenes to tell it. And I mean *a lot!* Probably, more than any other game I've played. Just as you're enjoying the action, everything stops for yet another bit of exposition. And let's look at the dramatis personae. The story features three brothers. The two older brothers, Ray and Thomas, joined the Confederate army. The younger brother, William, was already at a seminary, training to become a priest. You get to play the older brothers in the game and can choose which, chapter by chapter. However, they are both so dislikeable, I think I'd have preferred to have played William!

All these cut scenes sandwich a series of set pieces, much like Call of Duty. You are intended to play through these in a particular way and there is nothing built-in for a variety of playing styles. The designers obviously want you to be the six-gun (anti)hero going in with revolvers blazing. Not me, at all. Thomas is supposed to be the cunning one with a preference for the rifle but there is little cunning allowed. You normally fight alongside your brother and if you go too far away, you lose! The idiot goes in, guns blazing, and you're forced to follow him. Terrible.

So, you're being forcibly pushed through the chapters but there are a good number of well-concealed secrets to find. But you have to break off from the action to do this! For instance, you've high jacked a stagecoach, to get out of town fast, after shooting the sheriff. The entire town is trying to stop you. You just wouldn't stop in the middle and think "I'll just look in this barn over here ..." Not only does this feel unrealistic, you also have your idiot brother jabbering in the background telling you to "come on" and "stop hanging around". Fortunately, the secrets only give you access to bits of game background to be played outside the action. I didn't bother and I like looking for secrets.

The game also has a weapons upgrade system. You can find gold or search your victims for their cash and, with that, you can buy ammo and better weapons at stores and gun shops. These "shops" are often placed in the most unlikely places. Going back to the stagecoach chase, the entire town is after your hide yet you can stop in the middle of your escape and be served by a polite storekeeper! In the final chapter, you can actually halt your assault on a desert fortress and top-up with ammo from the travelling salesman outside !!

In fact, the game has a number of optional missions you can choose to do on your own. These can give you extra cash for better weapons. They were by far the most enjoyable parts of the game for me.

Now, the 'special actions'. Throughout the game you find yourself in the classic western duel, man vs. man. In these sequences, you have to strafe to keep the opposition in front of you and use the mouse to keep your hand as near to your gun as possible. When a bell tolls, you use the mouse to bring your hand down on to your gun, the game draws your weapon and you fire as a sight passes over the opposition. This was clearly designed for consoles. It seemed to be completely random as to whether or not your hand moved as you moved the mouse to draw. This wasn't helped by the fact that I had the mouse axis inverted for mouse-look, which meant I moved the mouse *up* to move my hand *down*! It just involved repetition until the game decided that you'd won. Tedious, annoying and boring.

Finally, the game has a kind of bullet-time that you build up by killing the opposition. Not unlike NecroVisioN. Fair enough. Unfortunately, by the time you'd built up enough kills to have the bullet time available, you'd run out of enemies! And when you could use it, it's not straight slo-mo. Each of the brothers gets a different approach, as does a co-op version when you attack with your brother. However, they all involve cursors/sights moving across the screen and you clicking or moving the mouse at appropriate points. Also, you use your revolver no matter what weapon you were carrying! Again, obviously put in for the console version. I could have always have done more damage with ordinary slo-mo and a rifle.

The worst example of this was when you were forced to use it on the aforementioned stagecoach escape. As far as I could tell, I was making sure I got the cursor over each of the opposition but I was dying every time. After 3 days of trying, someone pointed me at a YouTube walkthrough. The player made no attempt at aiming and just fired as many bullets as possible randomly. And sure enough, that's what got me through! "Console" stamped all over it.

Only two things made me complete this game. They had taken the trouble to implement a quick save for the PC version, which minimized the tedious repetition, and the story was genuinely interesting and I wanted to see how it ended. Otherwise I would have given up after a few chapters. I loved the Western background, the weapons were great and the story was top-notch. The gameplay was absolutely awful. A missed opportunity.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. : Call of Pripyat (2008) ****

The final STALKER game ... probably. This is the sequel to SoC. After Strelok closes down the brain scorcher, there is a rush of Stalkers to the centre of the Zone. Inevitably, chaos ensues. A fleet of USS military helicopters are sent in to sort things out. They all crash mysteriously and the entire mission is lost. You are a USS Major, and ex-Stalker, sent in undercover to try and find out what went wrong.

They finally got STALKER right, more or less. For a start, it was bug-free on release! The storyline is solid and drives much of the game but there are still plenty of side missions. And all these side missions complete properly. Graphically, it's the best looking with DX11 implemented if you have the right PC. Not as good as Far Cry 2 but up there with Fallout 3, except in brown! It's very realistic. You have to eat, you get exhausted and you can sleep (at last!). Night is properly dark, as CS, but you don't want to go out at night! That's when the new and even tougher mutants are likely to be about. One creature took me the best part of 50 shotgun shells to finish off and that was at close range!

Fortunately, you can get hold of good weapons and armour pretty quickly. Like CS, they are all upgradeable and this is where CoP's answer to RPG levelling comes in. You are your weapons! However, the technicians are limited in what they can do with their poor resources. It's up to you to find them better tools for the job. This spreads upgrades out throughout the course of the game, so you can't have the perfect sniper rifle in the first 5 minutes. Weapons also degrade quickly in the Zone and are constantly in need of repair. Upgrading and repairing your gear costs ...

Money is much more useful in CoP. The constant call on your funds to keep your stuff up to scratch means you have to trade. This means you're back to searching for artefacts and scavenging. Artefacts are as hard to get as SC. However, if you do the right missions, you can get an experimental detector which can make life easier. You know where the main anomalies are but surviving them is another matter. Stashes are well hidden with some real toughies to obtain. Ransacking bodies continues to be worthwhile but the Traders will no longer take any old tat. They want stuff in good condition. Do you pay to have your finds repaired before you sell them on? That's up to you to balance.

The other source of income is to see if anyone has a side mission for you. This normally ends in you receiving some benefit but not always cash. SoC missions are also much more complex than the "Find my hunting rifle for 100R" of the earlier games. It's not as complex as Fallout 3 but one mission can lead to another and you find yourself doing all sorts of interesting things. The missions you choose can also alter events in the game. Again, not as complex as Fallout but enough to make things interesting.

I have one major and one minor complaint which stops this from being ****½. The minor one is that it suffers from "galloping conclusion" syndrome, like Fallout. Once you take the mission that that starts the chain of events to the end of the game, it's over quite quickly with no chance of getting off the ride. It does make you play an awful lot more of the map than Fallout did but it's still an annoyance. Fortunately, I had an appropriate save and went back and finished off my exploration first. So, not the end of the world.

The second niggle is a bit more of a problem. You start the game under-equipped and it's tough. This is a good thing. Now, you can get good gear quite quickly and once you do get the basics in place, a lot of the game can be *too* easy. So, play at a harder level, I hear you say. Unfortunately, there are a few points where much harder would be a very serious challenge. I'm thinking particularly of escorting the scientists to "The Fen", where mutants and zombies are coming at you from all sides. I barely did this on "normal". There are a few instances like this. Perhaps they thought they would make it more accessible for new players but the imbalance detracted from the game, for me.

That said, I put this as best of the STALKER games and thoroughly enjoyed every one of the many game hours I played it.

NecroVisioN: Lost Company (2009) *½**

This is the prequel to its' name sake. This time, you play Zimmerman, the villain in the first game, and it explains what lead to the events of the original.

There's no messing about this time. The game gives you plenty of weaponry right from the start and then chucks wave after wave of the infected/undead at you. Having just played STALKER, I was shooting away when I remembered "this is NecroVisioN". So I swapped the guns for a Trench Club (a thumping great lump of wood with spikes sticking out of it!) and went in meleeing. I found myself laughing out loud because it was so much fun!

There are a few new weapons, along with the Trench Club and quite a few new enemies to take on. The game concentrates on "above ground" action and the WWI chapters are probably better than the original game. Challenge Rooms return and are just as much fun. In particular the last Room, where you have to save Nurses from the attentions of evil Doctors, is hilarious and pretty damn tough. The Dragon-flying chapter is replaced by a Bi-plane-flying chapter and this is where the trouble starts ...

For heaven-knows-what reasons, The Farm 51 didn't use "invert mouse" for flying. They did for the Dragon and it was the best first-person flying I've ever played. For someone like me, who has used an inverted mouse for gaming for the last 15 years, it made the chapter unplayable. Annoyingly, two of the Challenge Rooms are also based on flying.

I used a cheat to get around the flying chapter and really enjoyed the game. However, you only get the ShadowHand in the penultimate chapter. You get all the modes quickly but no spells. I get the feeling more was planned but deadlines kicked in. The WWI chapters were excellent but I am very fond of the ShadowHand and so this foreshortened ending was a shame. Another consequence was that you could never get your Fury level high enough to let good old NecroVisioN kick in.

I really wanted to go on and play the game at "Demon Crusher" (Hard). However, you can't use cheats, so the flying chapter got in the way, again! I cheated the cheats (!) and managed to get around it and continued having fun at DC. Then I hit a bug that finally stopped me. The Devs had made a door opening dependent on collecting a particular Vampire Artefact. Once you collect an Artefact in NVN, it never appears in subsequent re-plays. So, that was the end.

Neither Steam, 1C nor The Farm 51 will say if a patch is going to be made available. So this rating indicates my disappointment at the limited and bugged gameplay. It's still a good marking, though, because when you can play, it is pure gaming fun.

EDIT. A patch was released which resolved the problems. I happily played through the game again and

completed it on "Hard".

Bioshock 2 (2010) *****

Not many pre/sequels outdo their progenitor. Half-Life 2 managed it. So did NOLF 2. This is the third in my experience. I was expecting a pleasant, cash-in expansion but it turned out to be much more.

In this game, you find yourself playing one of the prototype Big Daddies. The original Daddies were bound to just one Little Sister and remained much more human. In the opening cut scene, you are forced to kill yourself by someone you later know as Dr. Lamb. Ten years later you are revived in a Vita-Chamber and need only one thing - to be re-united with your Little Sister. Ryan and Fontaine are long dead. Rapture is now "ruled" by the aforesaid Dr Lamb, who is trying to create the perfect person, or Utopian, through genetic modification. Her subject is her own daughter, Eleanor, who, as a Little Sister, was your bonded child.

Superficially, everything is much the same. Rapture still looks like Rapture and is as beautiful as ever, though you see the seedier side in this game. The plot unfolds through the usual found voice recordings. Health stations, research cameras, bots and vending machines are all in place. Splicers are as mad and beautifully voiced as ever. The voice acting of the main antagonists is also excellent. There are a good assortment of weapons, plasmids and tonics. So what made it so different?

At the end of my little piece on Bioshock, I say it fell between the two stools of RPG and Shooter. Well, this one is all Shooter! The Big Daddy weapons are hugely satisfying. These include a Rivet Gun, Speargun and filthy great Drill for melee. Hacking has been reduced from a mini-game to a simple, and not too hard, reaction test. Most importantly, Plasmid and Tonic slots are easily available and plentiful, so you rarely have to juggle them around. I barely used Gene Banks during the game. All this lets you get on with the business of blasting the opposition!

So, is it too easy now? No way. To offset the improved fighting abilities, the opposition has been beefed-up accordingly. As well as "traditional" Big Daddies, there are also Alpha-series Daddies, lighter and faster than their traditional counterparts, not bound to Little Sisters but just used as security by Lamb. There are giant Brute Splicers able to rip up street furniture and hurl it at you. And best/worst of all, Big Sisters. When Little Sisters hit puberty, they became uncontrollable and violent. They were put in miniature Big Daddy Suits and spliced to the hilt. They are used by Lamb to protect her source of Adam. If you rescue a Little Sister, a Big Sister might well be on her way to take revenge!

The other big change is the emphasis on set-piece defences. If your Little Sister is gathering Adam, then you can be sure every Splicer in the neighbourhood will want in on the action. There are a number of well-flagged super-Splicer fights. When a Big Sister is on the prowl, the game warns you in no uncertain terms because you will have to take precautions. To help out you get such things as Trap Rivets, Trap Spears and portable Mini-Turrets. Setting up for these defences is huge fun.

Since you now have loads of Plasmids and Tonics at hand, there are innumerable ways to tackle any fight. This was promised in the first game but I never felt they quite pulled it off. It reaches its full potential in this sequel. I played through this game 3 times, straight off, and was constantly finding new ways to take on the opposition.

Anything wrong with it? Well, you couldn't assign Plasmids to specific keys and they kept "moving around" as you spliced up. The final Boss Fight was far too easy and I proved it by doing it "no-scratch" on "Hard" difficulty. This is strange, given some of the frenetic defences of your Little Sister as she gathers Adam. But otherwise, just brilliant, First Person Shooter fun.

I thought long and hard before awarding 5*'s. However, I've only played a handful of games through multiple times straight away. This had the gameplay value of games like Painkiller and NecroVisioN but with the rich plot, graphic design and voice acting of a Half-Life. 5*'s it is then.

Metro 2033 (2010) **1/2

I was looking forward to this. I like the games coming out of Eastern Europe at the moment - STALKER, Cryostasis, NecroVisioN and, of course, Painkiller. It seemed promising. The remains of the population of Moscow now live in their metro system after a nuclear catastrophe. "Villages" have grown up around the stations. The outlying stations are being attacked by a new force, as well as the usual selection of mutated creatures. Your character takes it on himself to make his way to the great central station of Polis to get help

for his people.

First, the good things. It is a beautifully realised environment both conceptually and graphically. I imagine it's very impressive with DX11, in a gritty, post-apocalyptic sort of way. There has been some criticism of the limited weapons but I enjoyed them. Also, the AI has come in for criticism but I was flanked often enough! It has a strong storyline. I didn't find it particularly engaging (more of that later) but I've played through much worse. And bullets as currency is a brilliant idea.

So, what were the problems? First of all, it was designed with consoles in mind. There are no manual saves. You have checkpoints only and some really badly placed ones, at that. Also, you can't choose to go back to a particular checkpoint, only the start of a sub-section. More repetition.

Besides the tedium of having to repeat the bits you're not interested in, it also forces you through the game quickly. You die quite easily so you're always desperate to reach the next checkpoint. I checked my Steam stats and I finished the game in 18 hours. I'm a really slow player and the most minor of games usually takes me around 30 hours.

The devs are very proud of their story and its links to the novel. Unfortunately, they tell it through endless cut scenes and sections where you can do nothing but look around as you're taken, physically, through the plot. They have the ability to have NPCs telling you what's going on and use it occasionally (like Half-Life). I can't understand why they didn't do that more. I just found that it distanced me from the story.

Between the many cut scenes, you're presented with set pieces of action. I have no problems with a linear game but there's rarely more than one way to tackle it. You are frequently in co-op with a friendly NPC. Here the AI does fall down. There can be simple ways to deal with the situation but you've got to stay with the idiot or you lose.

Then there are the controls. As a console 'variant' they try to use a single key for multiple purposes. For instance, you press "F" to turn your head lamp on. To charge up your battery for the lamp, which you have to do often, you press and hold the "F" key. There's a very fine line between the game accepting "tap" and "hold". So you're sneaking around in the dark (oh yes, it's very dark). You take a quiet moment to charge your battery and end up putting your head lamp on. A bit of a giveaway for the enemy. You can also intend to change your gas mask filter but end up taking your gas mask off

Finally, survival events. I hate these console-oriented tools of the Devil!! Something happens that is completely unavoidable and to survive it you just have to hit the given key quickly and often enough. If you fail, it's usually instant death and all the way back to the last checkpoint. There is a climb up a ruined radio tower. Painkiller or Half-Life would have made you find the right path and do some clever jumping. Here you just keep moving forward, mash the "E" key and watch the scripted action. No brains required and no fun, either.

The game has an alternate ending if you do certain things during the game. There are also Steam achievements to be had but I certainly won't be playing through the game again for either. There seems to be something about these console-oriented games that leave me cold. I had the same sorts of problems with "Call of Juarez 2". They get good reviews but I cannot get into their groove. It may be that I'm a PC purist but I'm going to buck the trend of the professional reviews and say "don't bother".

Call of Cthulu: Dark Corners of the Earth (2010) **1/2

This was an "old" game (2005) I bought as a fill-in. I'd looked at it, on and off, for a while and got a number of recommendations from fellow gamers. I really wanted to like this game and it has a lot of things going for it but, ultimately, I didn't enjoy it.

So, what is it? It's a first-person horror game based on H.P Lovecraft's famous Cthulu mythos stories, mainly "The Shadow Over Innsmouth". You play an ex-cop, now PI, with a history of mental illness. Not least, 6 years of complete amnesia and a subsequent stay in a psychiatric institution. You take a job to investigate the disappearance of a grocery store manager in the old fishing port of Innsmouth. And things go down hill from there!

First, the good things. You have a completely clear screen - no HUD. If you need to know your ammo count, or whatever, check your inventory. Realistic and I liked it. That also means no cross-hairs. Iron sights or guess!. Again, I liked that. The game is told entirely in the first person, even for cut scenes. This is very

involving and laudable. There's an over-complex healing system (which you can ignore!) but it still depends on health packs and not just hiding behind a crate for a few seconds! On which, failing health is shown by the screen fading, blood splashes and you groaning. Again, very well done. Along with physical injury, you are constantly on the edge of madness. Shocking events and sights, from corpses to giant sea demons, will affect your sanity, distorting your vision and, in extremis, causing you to commit suicide! You don't always have an arsenal of weapons and parts of the game must be done by stealth, puzzle solving or just running for your life! All of these things combine to support that Lovecraftian feeling of horror and panic as the game progresses. All very good. However ...

The first problem is my *bete noir*, fixed checkpoints. I grudgingly accept these, nowadays, and both FEAR 2 and, especially, Wolfenstein did them brilliantly. This doesn't. There is far too much action between saves. There are some tough situations to cope with and although they are easier once you've figured out what to do, just repeating them is too tedious. There is a great chase through the buildings of Innsmouth as you try to escape a band of nasties who are out for blood. This entire sequence would be fun but it can only be done one way, every element has to be carefully timed and if you fail you die. I don't believe anyone could beat this straight off and I suspect most (like me) need many tries. With no intermediate saves, an exciting piece of game design was reduced to "Oh! Not *again!*". Another example was the hardest boss fight in the game, by far, followed by a precarious series of jumps. Miss your footing and you have to do the boss fight again, as well. That's just wrong.

My other big problem was with the puzzles. If games like Fallout 3 and System Shock 2 have their roots in RPGs, then this is a relative of point-and-click adventure games. Most of the puzzles were of the "use this, on this" variety. Now, I had no problem with physics in Half-Life 2, manipulating time in Timeshift or using Portals but I found these kinds of puzzles completely irrational. This wasn't helped by having to look at exactly the right spot on an object before using an item on it. For instance, a special "weed killer" had to be used on an alien plant. I thought that was the solution but it didn't seem to work. In fact, I had the right solution but it had to be at a particular spot amongst its roots. I wasted loads of time trying to find another way forward. On a number of occasions I tried to bolt a door, to stymie pursuit, only to open the door instead! This is not my idea of fun.

Lastly there were some inconsistencies that were just annoying. You are given an open area to explore but if you do things in the "wrong" order, puzzles become insoluble and, in one instance, crashed the game. A number of times you are presented with running away as the only means of continuing with the game. In the very tough boss fight I mentioned, running and completing the tricky jumps seemed a viable way through but the game didn't allow you to complete the final element (climbing some vines) to escape until after the fight. In other cases, the game made fighting impossible as a way through by using constantly respawning enemies. This gameplay may be acceptable to an adventure gamer but it was just an annoyance for me. I freely admit that I used a walkthrough, in the end, as a way to finish the game.

Because I liked the way the story was told and presented so much, I was tempted to go for 3*'s . However, since this document is all about classic FPS's, not adventure games, I couldn't quite lift it into that category. A shame because it could have been so much better.

Sniper: Ghost Warrior (2010) ***

You are part of an American covert team sent in to eliminate the statutory evil dictator of a South American island state. He's into supplying drugs and, indeed, uranium to anyone with the money, while oppressing his own people. You mainly see things through the eyes of the team's Sniper but also get to take the part of the other team members occasionally.

The sniping can be very realistic. The game can take into account distance, wind speed, your stance and heart rate. On "Easy" and "Medium" (I played on Medium) you are given a reticle that shows you where to aim, taking into account these factors. On "Hard" you have to do that yourself. I didn't play on Hard!

It's only a game for those that like a bit of sneak'n'snipe, which I do. The graphics reminded me of Far Cry 2, which is a compliment in my book. That takes its toll on your GPU, though. I was getting greater than persistence of vision but rarely more than 30fps. Quite playable, though. It is also reminiscent of the original Far Cry in as much as some sections can be hard as nails. Thankfully, for a multi-platform release, you get quicksave/load and need to use it often.

Sadly, it has a number of problems. For a game that positively encourages sneaking, it uses invisible walls over much, stopping you taking clever routes. Having encouraged you to sneak everywhere, it then chucks in the odd scripted section when you have to run and dodge. I'm guessing that the devs thought a game based

entirely on sniping might be too much for the market. So, occasionally, you play other members of the squad. The game then becomes "Modern Warfare", in which I have no interest at all. I found these sections both hard and tedious. Finally, some people have found the game buggy. I hit a show-stopper early on but their tech support was excellent. After that it was fine.

I really enjoyed the sniping but the other bits let it down. Worth a buy when it's budget and if you really like a bit (lot) of sneak'n'snipe.

Singularity (2010) ****

A strange anomaly occurs on a small island off the Russian coast, generating huge amounts of energy and disrupting communications. The Americans fear this may be some new weapon or another Chernobyl, so they risk diplomatic relations and send in you and your squad. The anomaly, the titular Singularity, causes an EMP bringing down your helicopter. As you try to make your way through the ruins of some kind of industrial complex on the island, you are thrown back in time to 1955 when the complex is in the middle of the catastrophe that caused its ruin. Here you save a man who should have died. On returning to the current day, you find that man became leader of a Russia that now dominates the world. Whoops!

The game is all about you time hopping back and forth to try and put your mistake right. You are helped in this by the leading scientist of the complex, both as a young man and an old man! He guides you to a gadget he developed called the Time Manipulation Device (TMD) which is also being sought by the person you saved and who is now the Dictator of the World. Phew!

The plot is, in fact, a lot of tosh! Even in the world of sci-fi and fantasy games, it lacks any internal logic. There are so many loop holes, you give up counting. As for the actual gameplay, it "borrows" from innumerable other games. Plot and time manipulation from TimeShift; gravgun-alike and female companion from Half-Life 2; health and upgrade system from BioShock. There are probably a few others in there, as well. It's a multi-platform release, so you're stuck with a checkpoint system and clumsy controls.

Rubbish, you would think but not so. Raven, the developers, have put all these elements together in a package that is so much, pure fun that you forget all these problems. The TMD lets you push enemies away; levitate and drop/throw items (especially fuel barrels, gas cannisters and liquid oxygen cylinders!); age/unage items and enemies; turn human enemies into mutants; create a time-stopping bubble. This leads to some simple puzzles to off-set the shooting.

The shooting is fun, as well, however. You get all the usual suspects - shotgun, machine gun, grenade launcher, rocket gun etc. You can only carry two at a time, though. However, some guns have been designed to work with ammunition infused with the "time element" E99. This means you get a sniper rifle that gives you a period of time dilation (slo-mo a la FEAR) and, joy of joys, the Seeker which allows you to follow and steer a bullet in flight!

Although some upgrade management is involved, the game wants you to be running around, turning mutants into dust and catching hand grenades! The items that allow upgrades aren't too hard to find. Many of the TMD powers have little or no "cost". If you run out of ammo, you are a very bad shot indeed!

Even with all these powerful "gimmicks" Raven have still managed to make the game challenging, with some very memorable boss fights and scripted sequences. I played through twice and the "Hard" run was just that. I must admit you become too powerful towards the very end but I was dying regularly up until then.

Singularity wasn't widely publicised on its release. I have yet to see a copy in a retail store and it was quite hard to get online. This is a great shame because it was a wonderful, turn-brain-off, shooter and deserves much wider recognition. Thoroughly enjoyed.

Borderlands (2010) **½**

I thought that this game was primarily about its co-op, like L4D. Consequently, I ignored it on its release. I was told it had a good SP campaign, so I thought I'd give it a try. What a star! I played this solidly for over two months!! But back to the beginning ...

You have come to the run-down mining planet Pandora in the hope of finding the fabled Vault, which is said

to contain alien technology and treasures. Although widely believed to be a myth, there starts to be a number of very solid reasons to believe it's real. Not least, a "Guardian Angel" who appears to you and helps you on your way. The game is presented in a very cartoon-like manner, shunning the realism of many modern shooters. I liked it a lot. The voice acting is also pretty good. In particular, a scientist who starts out sane and sinks into wilder and wilder bouts of paranoia as the planet takes its toll on her sanity.

It's part RPG and you can choose to start with one of 4 character types. The Hunter is the sneaky sniper with his pet hunting bird. The Siren has an affinity for "elemental" weapons and can "phasewalk" (move into a parallel dimension for a short period). The Berserker is best with heavy weaponry and can "go berserk", punching everything to death! Finally, the Soldier is the classic gunner, able to deploy a portable turret to help out.

These different characters can be developed with a straightforward skills system and advance through a levelling system just like a classic RPG. However, this is a RPG for shooters. There are statistics going on in the background but it's not as obvious as Fallout 3. You can headshot successfully from Day 1. It's other "shooter" feature is the game's ability to generate innumerable different guns. You're always on the look out for a better sniper rifle or an SMG that does more elemental damage. This becomes part of the RPG development.

The game levels up around you and so you never become ridiculously powerful. All your skills and weapons give you an edge but you'll always find tougher enemies out there. It also allows a second playthrough for each character type. You tackle the same missions again but bring your character forward from the end of the first run. All the enemies are levelled up correspondingly to make this as big a challenge. I happily took a Hunter, Siren and Berserker through 2 playthroughs or, at least, until I had maxed their skills. Consequently, I looked around and two months had gone by!

Special mention must go to the "Runner", your motorised transport. This is the best driving in any FPS, full stop. You actually go into 3rd person, which I prefer, and you can steer with the mouse - joy. Even better, the game figures out where you want to go from the mouse movement even when reversing. I found myself parallel parking just because it was so easy!

So, why not 5*s? The save system was awful! No classic PC save/reload system was implemented. You would save at the beginning of an area then there would be a very few save points along the way. If you quit the game, these intermediate save points were ignored and you start from the beginning again with all the enemies respawned! Some areas could take well over an hour to complete. Consequently, short periods of gaming became impossible. Also, you couldn't complete part of a mission. The game would remember the bits you'd completed but would always set the mission up to start from the beginning? Sometimes, this actually broke the game logic. The shooting and use of special abilities is so much fun in this game, I often wanted to repeat a section a different way but this was impossible. You learnt to work with the system but it was always an annoyance.

The save system aside, this was a hugely enjoyable game and I will definitely be playing the expansions/DLC. Highly recommended.

Fallout : New Vegas (2010) *½**

I feel ambivalent about this game. On the face of it, it should have been even better than its progenitor but something wasn't quite right. But let's start at the beginning. Here we are back in the post-nuclear Fallout world. This time, we're over on the west coast in the Mojave Desert around, what was, Las Vegas. You've been dug out of a shallow grave by a mysterious robot after being shot in the head. Your life is saved by a local doctor. Plastic surgery repairs your smashed face but your memories of life before are dim and muddled. You appear to have been some kind of courier and were high-jacked for your consignment. You set off to find out what happened and take revenge.

The west coast has been less devastated than Washington and the east coast. Nevertheless, it is still lawless and there is a definite "Wild West" feel to it. However, the buds of democracy and order are blooming in the form of the New California Republic and its expansionist policies. So do you help bring the old ways back to the Mojave or help New Vegas keep its independence or help the Legion bring authoritarian rule or just try and get all you can out of the conflicts for yourself?

So, the good things. This game is huge. I spent 147 hours on one playthrough. Fallout 3 took me 121 hours. The storyline is much more complex than the original. Factions play a significant part in the game

and it is very hard to remain neutral. How you interact with the factions decides what quests are available to you. Your travelling companions also bring quests unique to them. I'm pretty sure I've only done 60%-70% of possible missions. The storyline is much more "adult", not rude but more disturbing. F3 always felt vaguely "cute" to me. New Vegas earns its "18". Guns can now be used relatively successfully outside VATS. In particular, proper sniping is viable. It should have outshone the original game but ...

Some things just didn't work. I'd say the plot was far more complex than F3 but that could lead to anomalies. Right to the inevitable end of the main plot I was still being shown an action from an old quest that couldn't possibly be completed. There were many other quests that remained open because the way I played made them "uncompleteable". This was a bit more than an annoyance because you could spend lots of time on a mission for which you could never gain XP or satisfactorily conclude.

The biggest bugbear for me was the game balance. At the beginning you are very weak indeed. I remember at the beginning of F3, after leaving the Vault, I took on some bandits. It was hard but possible. Not a chance in New Vegas. Also, the "wildlife" has been beefed up. Pretty well everything is lethal. If you thought Deathclaws were tough in F3, they're pussy cats compared to their New Vegas cousins. You have to be so careful, the game isn't much fun.

Along with that, you are given little direction from the game. In F3, you had the "Moirai Missions" to get you up and running. In New Vegas, you really are left to explore as you will and, at the beginning, you can find yourself outclassed frequently. This means you could have wandered for hours, finally found something vaguely interesting but then be unable to do anything about it. This was very frustrating and I reloaded from earlier saves on a number of occasions.

The mid-game felt like Fallout as I know her! However, you now max at L30. I achieved this about two thirds of the way through and became a demi-god! Just killing everyone was a viable option. Plus, your companions are much tougher than in F3. I had Rex, the bionic dog, and Veronica, an estranged member of the Brotherhood of Steel. In F3, I had to look after my followers, keep them out of trouble, feed them stimpacks etc. These two were close to indestructible. Rex, in particular, was lethal. The three of us could cope with almost anything the game could throw at us. Perhaps it was set up for "hard" but shouldn't "normal" also be a challenge?

Finally, I was annoyed that I was excluded from so many missions. In F3, you can stay neutral and do things for everyone. Here, the plotting of the interactions between the factions is very clever but I hated seeing a whole series of messages telling me I could not complete quests. The same goes for my followers. I know if I'd have picked other people I'd have got different missions. All good for replay value but not so good if you're unlikely to play the game again.

Weapons and ammo are much more freely available than in F3. If you've got the money, you can buy it. I have no problem with that. Yet they have introduced more crafting systems to produce not only weapons but ammo and potions. I never had to use any of it throughout the entire game. But you keep spent cartridges just in case, cluttering up an already busy inventory.

One final, personal gripe. Something I never thought would happen in a Fallout game. An area is protected by a faction with artillery. Once you're spotted, you are in big trouble. The game has set up a particular route to dash through the bombardment and wants you to use it. So, miraculously, you're spotted even while using a Stealth Boy while crouching in the middle of the night! I think not. On the rails shooter, fair enough but not Fallout.

Perhaps the game has been designed to be played on "Hard" or, in the new, hyper-realistic "Hard-Core" mode. I think a game should be fun at every difficulty level and too often Fallout: New Vegas wasn't. Still worth a play, if only to see how the game resolves the complex plot but not as enjoyable as its predecessor.

Borderlands DLC (2011)

Having come to Borderlands late, it already had a number of DLCs (expansion packs) available. I shall group them together here.

DLC1 - The Zombie Island of Dr Ned ****

In Jakob's Cove, Dr Ned's (who is not Dr Zed in any way ...) experiments to help mankind by reanimating the dead, has ended in a zombie, and general monster, apocalypse. You're the next in the line of a number of dupes, sorry "brave zombie hunters" hired by Jakob's to sort it out.

This is a first class expansion. All new monsters (although some were reskins but not not intrusively so) and a new environment with a Halloween theme running through much of it. It's also quite extensive. It took me a good few hours to play all the missions. I played this in co-op with a Berserker and solo with a Siren. This threw up some anomalies.

Playing co-op with two low-50's level characters was great fun. The balance was just right. After playing co-op for a bit, I thought I'd try the Siren solo and suddenly life became very difficult. The Berserker was in the middle of Playthrough 2 but the Siren was playing a "2.5". Because of the DLC and increasing skill ceiling, the developers had organised it that for anyone on a "2.5" run, monsters and missions level up with you. Consequently, most of the opposition were a level or two above me throughout. It was a real slog. The up side was that I went in at L58 but came out at L64!

This lead to another problem. I've commented on the save problems of the game in my original review. Here there was only one entry point into the game. Since you have to fight your way through a *lot* of zombies to get anywhere, that did become tedious. This was especially so when you had to do a mission in one sitting or else you'd have to fight your way through again. The only compensating feature was that there were a number of missions to collect zombie brains, so at least you were killing to an end!

Still highly recommended but more fun if you tackle it during the standard playthroughs.

DLC2 - Mad Moxxi's Underdome Riot *1½

A very big disappointment after Dr Ned. Here we have a number of "arenas" run by the titular Mad Moxxi. Each arena requires you to play a number of rounds with five waves of enemies in each. Each round is increasingly hard. The early arenas require you to tackle 5 rounds, later arenas require 20 rounds!

I can only describe the first arena because that's as far as I got! It was a well designed urban setting using existing models. The different waves gave a variety of enemies and objectives. Mad Moxxi's commentary was very funny with excellent voice acting. Arena "mode" isn't my favourite style but I was quite enjoying it until I got killed for the first time. I respawned into some kind of "sin bin" where I could rotate and snipe on the spot but not otherwise move and a few seconds later was told I'd lost. I was a tad confused. I then found that I had to restart the game not at the beginning of the wave, not at the beginning of the round but at the beginning of the arena – Round 1, Wave 1!! I'd spent well over 30 minutes getting as far as I did.

I thought I was doing something wrong, so I read around the Net. These arenas are designed for full, four person co-op. If you get killed, you go to the aforementioned sin bin where you can snipe to help the rest of the team but not move. If the remaining team beat the wave, you respawn ready for the next. Only if the entire team is killed do they have to restart the arena. Playing solo, you are "the entire team" so you're stymied.

Even with a full team you should set aside 45 minutes or so for each of the 5 round arenas. I found one report that said it took one team 4½ hours to complete one of the 20 round arenas. A save "post", activated at end of wave, or even end of round, that you had to run too would have made this playable solo. As it is, I cant be bothered. Worth playing a round or two to listen to Mad Moxxi's commentary but that's it.

EDIT. I have since played this in co-op and it becomes a different game. With someone to revive you, the arenas are eminently survivable and a lot of fun. In fact, I've gone on to play the 20-rounders. However, the marking in this document reflects solo play and so it remains.

DLC3 - The Secret Armoury of General Knoxx ****

This was advertised as one of the best DLCs published for any game and that is arguably true. It updated the level cap to 69, gave you new vehicles, new enemies as well as some old favourites (Moxxi is hilarious in this game) and there's plenty of it.

Atlas are trying to re-establish their grip on Pandora after you scuppered things in the original game. They've sent General Knoxx of the Crimson Lance to sort things out. He's put a price on your head and your only chance is to "remove" him before someone claims the reward. Fortunately, you find an ally in an ex-Lance assassin who has her own reasons for getting rid of Knoxx.

This is the toughest of the DLCs. You face lots of well equipped Crimson Lance. The Midgets ride skaggs and throw dynamite. And there are Drifters, giant desert "spiders", throwing poison and generally stamping on you. You have to use vehicles to cover big distances and complete a number of the missions. This

includes proving a loop-the-loop is possible, for Moxxi!

After you kill Knoxx and raid his armoury, there are still missions to complete. A word of warning. The game now levels up to a "2.5 playthrough". That is, all enemies are at your level, at least, but generally higher. This is a particular problem if you want to take on Crawmerax, a gigantic beast who has a chance of dropping the best loot in the series. The mission is called "You. Will. Die" for good reason!

DLC4 – Claptrap's New Robot Revolution ***

Having got rid of the Atlas Corporation, Hyperion see you as a real threat to their, more subtle, interests. They send the Interplanetary Ninja Assassin Claptrap, glimpsed at the end of the first game, to sort you out. Unfortunately, this Claptrap is too clever for Hyperion's own good. It takes offence at the way claptraps are treated on Pandora and undermines their programming to create a claptrap revolutionary army. The cute, helpful Claptraps are now the enemy. They start to overrun Pandora. So, instead of killing you, Hyperion have to employ you to stop the revolution.

It's a fun premise but is let down by the implementation. It's not as big as Knoxx. "New" characters are just re-skins. It's the same old Pandoran environment with nothing new. Even the missions are derived from the previous games (collect brains /collect claptrap parts). It's a perfectly good slice of Borderlands action but derivative. Not in the same class as Ned or Knoxx. This should have been DLC3 and the series should have gone out with a bang with Knoxx. A shame.

Bulletstorm (2011) **½**

People Can Fly, of Painkiller fame, finally got the opportunity to make another game of their own. And what a stonker! They completely ignored the trend for realistic, military shooters and went for a game in which "shooting" became fun again.

From the beginning. You are an ex-Special Services soldier in the far future. You and your team realise that you have been duped into carrying out missions for political rather than military ends, killing innocent people, and go rogue. Some years later, you've become a drunken space pirate targeting the military empire that betrayed you. By pure luck you come across the flag(space)ship, of the General who manipulated you, in orbit around an obscure planet, Stygia. In a suicidal attack you take his ship down. Both ships crash on the planet below. This planet turns out to have been a pleasure world built by an interplanetary corporation. Though it isn't a pleasure any more....

First of all, the criticisms. It's a console port and it shows, in game and in the menus. There's no manual save, though the checkpoints are adequate. There's no 'jump', only an option to vault certain objects, which is annoying. It uses "quick time events" for some actions, but at least progress doesn't depend on them. There are some blatant invisible walls. Both me and my AI companions have got stuck in the scenery, at various times, requiring a restart. The story is told through too many cut scenes and had a pretty predictable ending. It's short by any standard. I've even had a couple of CTDs.

I've slammed games in this document just for some of these reasons. If this was a normal shooter I'd be hard pushed to give it 3*s but then there's the glorious gameplay...

The game is all about "killing with skill". That is, killing the opposition in specific prescribed ways (not dissimilar to NecroVisioN) to gain points. You can spend points to upgrade your weapons. To aid you in this, you have an energy leash to grab enemies or "thump" them into the air, a powerful kick and an assortment of typically insane PCF weapons. The leash and kick put your enemies into "slow time" to allow you to set up really silly kills. How many games allow you to rip off an opponents armour and shoot them in the rear with a flare, catapulting them across the map. This gives you the skillshot "Fire in the Hole" ?! I played the solo campaign through 4 or 5 times, it was so much fun.

There are two other modes of play. "Echoes" allows you to play through selected sections of the game again, so you can try and maximize your score. Scores are held in GFWL, so you can see how well you've done compared to the rest of the world. I didn't enjoy this much. Better, is "Anarchy". This is a co-op game where you face waves of enemies on specially designed maps. To go onto the next wave, you must beat a target score set for the current wave. This is great fun both in co-op and solo.

Not everyone is going to "get" the gameplay. If you do, this is one of the most "fun" games released in years.

Portal 2 (2011) ****

"I'm not sure if I should include this ..." Oh! That's how I started my review of the original game and it's still true now. Portal 2 is still a puzzler rather than a shooter and so I'm never going to enjoy it as much as, say, Bulletstorm. That said it is a superb bit of game design.

This time it has a story and additional characters. The story is good and the voice acting is outstanding. GLaDOS is as mad as ever but a helpful pod called Wheatley and the recorded voice of the founder of Aperture Science are both hilarious. As well as the Portal Gun, you also come across other experimental substances and devices being developed by Aperture Science. Together, these take Portal puzzling to a whole new level. I lost count of the times I thought "this is impossible"! It always was, though.

The game is longer than the original but still quite short. And it's not a shooter. So I give it 4*. But to end this opinion in the same way as the original "... As a puzzle game, it's 5*s without a doubt. Play it!"

Crysis 2 (2011) ***

I don't know what to make of this game. Throughout, I was thinking "why aren't I enjoying this?". But to start at the beginning.

The aliens discovered in the original Crysis were only the start of the reawakening of their kind. They are erupting (literally) all over the world. You're a marine involved in an outbreak in New York. You last about 5 minutes in the war zone before you're seriously injured. You're rescued by someone wearing the classic Crysis suit. He's been infected with something nasty and bequeaths the suit to you. You unravel a plot which reveals the suit itself is a weapon able to destroy the aliens "energy" source. So, off you go, opposed by a rogue private militia and, of course, the aliens.

You soon realise this isn't the semi-open world of its predecessors, Far Cry and Crysis. This is an on-the-rails shooter. I have no problem with that but I was expecting something different. You are working your way through a brilliantly modelled New York. The graphics are outstanding but unlike Crysis, attainable by a half-decent PC. The suit is as much fun as ever and is now upgradeable. It should have been good but there were lots of niggles.

There was the usual console checkpoints with no ability to go back beyond the last. They were generally OK but a few were annoying. You are over-directed to within an inch of your life. You constantly have someone telling you what to do next. Consequently, there are secrets to find but the checkpoints are always moving you on, deterring you from doubling back and hunting around. Even then, the things you find are of the "achievement" variety, unlocking stuff outside the game. Of no interest to me. Vehicle sections popped up for no reason and added nothing at all. All the vehicles steered like drunken bison. At least they weren't as bad as Crysis. QTE's also featured abstractly. The finale of the game relied on a series of QTE's. That's inexcusable. You're always being told to act quickly but, in fact, can take as long as you like. Stealth is a valid and enjoyable way of playing, so why even pretend. Lastly, the design makes you feel very small in the game world. I've heard reviewers talk about this before but it's never bothered me. Here I tended to feel like a midget rather than the guy in the massive suit.

However, the biggest annoyance was the suit upgrade mechanism. The suit can absorb nanomites given up by aliens when they die. These are the "currency" that allows you to upgrade the suit. The nanomites disperse after a few seconds, like souls in Painkiller, so you have to be close to your enemy to pick them up. That's fine, except one of the things the game does really well is stealth and sniping. If you want to play that way, you lose out on upgrades!

So, not a bad game but not a worthy successor to its progenitors. I was beginning to "get it" towards the end. Like FEAR 2, it may be a game I enjoy more a second time around. There's also a DirectX 11 Ultra Graphics patch. So, I may go back when new games dry up but not for a while.

Duke Nukem Forever (2011) **½

I played Duke Nukem 3D 14 years ago and loved it. DNF has had the most troubled gestation period of any game I know. Bankruptcy, commercial disputes, court cases. You name it, it suffered it. It was 12 years, on and off, in the making. It got terrible reviews but I thought I'd give it a chance. Oh dear!

The plot line is simple. The aliens are back and only the Duke can stop them. The first problem is you get

exactly the same aliens as its predecessor. Ok, they're now in proper 3D but is that enough? They are also extremely lethal. You have regenerating health but a Were Pig can leap on you from a ludicrous distance and you're dead within seconds. As for bosses, instant kills aren't out of the question. I was playing on my usual "middle" difficulty. I shudder to think what this is like on "hard".

So what do you get to fend off the same aliens? The same line up of weapons! That's not a problem in itself but instead of letting you carry loads of guns, you're limited to two as if you were playing Call of Duty or the like. When you get to a fun gun, like the Shrink Ray, you don't pick it up because it only works on a few enemies! So, you end up with some combo of shottie, machine gun and sniper rifle all the time. Yawn! This was such a big problem for players, they have released a patch that allows 4 weapons. But it's not a realistic game. Why not go for the old style arsenal and let the players have fun?

Now, the level design. Sure, DN3D was a corridor shooter but there were secret areas that could get you past the enemy or allow you to take some other action. DNF is just a corridor shooter. More often than not, the game will trap you in a room and just chuck loads of enemies at you. No tactics of any description to apply. Just run'n'gun and repeat until you get it right. In one instance you walk down some steps into an area and are ambushed. My first reaction was to race back up the stairs. No, they've put an *invisible wall* behind you. That's pathetic.

The worst examples of this are the boss fights. They all consist of being trapped in a small area with infinite ammo and you shoot. Again, repeat until you get it right. In one instance, you face a boss while you're underwater, have to get oxygen from a stream of bubbles in a fixed position, have ammo caches some way away, can only use explosive ammo and the creature can kill you in a couple of blows. This is not fun.

To avoid this tedium, you really need a quick save to avoid doing the same thing over and over again. It's a console port, so you get stuck with checkpoint saves. These were often too far apart and it was an effort to go through a boring routine to get to the bit you actually had to beat. I did think of throwing in the towel on more than one occasion.

Shooting should be the life blood of a Duke Nukem game and we see that's not so good. However, the developers did try to "diversify". There are a number of driving sections. The vehicles are the worst handling monstrosities I've ever come across. At least as bad as Crysis. The game wouldn't even let you get out and walk! Unbelievably, the franchise ended up in the hands of Gearbox who implemented the best driving ever, in a FPS, in Borderlands. I can only assume the game was too far gone for them to change it.

We also have puzzles. DN3D had a few, in passing. One of the most memorable was when you had to shrink to do a task. But that was a brief one-off. DNF loves this idea and you spend a considerable time shrunk, puzzle jumping around "amusing" environments. Nooooo!

Similarly, DN3D had Duke as a bit of a male chauvinist and there was the famous bar with the scantily-clad pole dancers. In DNF, this has become a prime feature of the game with "sexy" females in "titillating" activities. However, for a game with an "18" rating, the humour seemed to be aimed at 13 year olds. The inventive swearing in Bulletstorm was ironic and made me laugh. I just found DNF embarrassing.

This is at it's worst in a dream sequence (yes, "dream sequence"!) after Duke is knocked unconscious. You find yourself in a strip club scavenging for "adult" items for a stripper who promises you a lap dance. Sort of a 1980's risqué adventure game. Irrelevant and rather pathetic.

Can I say anything good about the game. Well, the final boss fight showed a glimmer of classic Duke Nukem. It was well balanced and good fun. Why couldn't that have been applied to the rest of the game?

FEAR 3 (2011) *1/2**

In FEAR 2, the protagonist was a soldier who had artificially been given the abilities of the original "Point Man". The game ended with you impregnating a mature manifestation of Alma. We pick up the game at the end of this unnatural pregnancy. Alma is about to give birth and her "contractions" are tearing the world apart, quite literally!

This game returns you to the roles (note plural) of the true offspring of Alma, Point Man and Paxton Fettel, even though Fettel is dead! Point Man has been captured by Armacham and is to be executed shortly. Fettel, like his mother, exists as a semi-corporeal being. He thinks he and Point Man should be there at "the birth", as a family, and so helps him escape.

You get to play as either Point Man or Fettel. As Point Man, you get the usual FEAR gameplay. That is, intense fire fights against pockets of enemies and any creatures conjured up by Alma. It's a straightforward, on the rails shooter, more or less (see later). However, this is the first DX11 game I've played and the graphics were excellent. A long way away from the first FEAR, with those repetitive rooms and corridors.

You also get to play as Fettel. In his "spirit" form, he has the ability to "blast" his opponents, levitate them and possess them. When you possess an enemy, you get to use normal weapons and use their life energy before yours! This is very entertaining.

The plot goes slightly bizarre at the end. Before you and Fettel can be with Alma, you must first face up to your past and your true father, the scientist who impregnated Alma to breed telepaths like you. You return to your old "home" where you were treated as laboratory specimens. The game then goes all Cryostasis, with flashbacks and spectres from your past. Strange but it didn't ruin things for me. But I liked Cryostasis!

You can also play through the game in two-person co-op, one as Point Man and one as Fettel. I can imagine that would be a lot of fun. However, I've rated the game for its SP value. As a straight shooter with Point Man, I would have given it 3* but the replay value added by a Fettel playthrough gives it that extra half.

Dead Island (2011) ****

The ubiquitous "zombie virus" has hit the exclusive holiday island of Banoi. After drinking too much the night before you wake up with a hangover only to find most of the inhabitants are mindless, man-eating zombies. As you try to escape, you are attacked and bitten but saved by a few survivors. It seems that you are immune to the virus. This makes you very important to other survivors who need your help for them to continue to be survivors.

This game is a FPS/RPG - Borderlands crossed with Fallout crossed with Left4Dead.

Like Borderlands, you choose one of four characters to play. The four can be played together in co-op through the main story. Each character has a particular strength (good with guns, good with blades etc.) and has three skill trees to develop their abilities. You can build up Rage, from killing enemies, that can be used in a devastating Fury attack, unique to each character. Like Borderlands, there are transition points between maps but each of these maps is larger and more complex than a typical Borderlands map. They are also more varied, featuring the up-market resort area, the very down-market town for the locals and workers and the interior jungle with Banoi's original inhabitants.

Like Fallout, these maps are worth exploring. There are many missions to find just by wandering around, whereas Borderlands took you everywhere you needed to go. Weapons need constant repair and there is a crafting system to adapt them for more damage. To craft, you will need assorted items you can find in your travels. Unlike Fallout, weight and volume is ignored. You can carry as many non-weapon items as you like. This is a good thing. In contrast, crafting is semi-realistic. It can be anything from hammering some nails through a baseball bat to smearing poison on a machete blade.

Like Left4Dead, you are faced with endless hordes of zombies. However, huge numbers don't come racing at you. You face smaller groups but, to make up for it, they are incredibly hard to kill. They just keep getting up until you've done them a serious amount of damage. There are also "boss" zombies like L4D.

One of the big differences between Dead Island and the aforementioned games is that guns are scarce and relatively useless. Bullets and shells don't have a major effect on zombies. The game emphasises melee with club and knife. You use anything you can lay your hands on, starting with an oar from a boat house through to assorted machetes and cleavers. I must say that this does feel more realistic on an island like Banoi. I liked the melee a lot.

If a zombie apocalypse was to happen, this game is probably as good a representation of how it would be. And there lies its weakness. You always feel very vulnerable in Dead Island. You are easily hurt and Boss zombies can take you out with only a few hits. Whereas I don't want to develop a character into a demi-god, like Fallout, I wouldn't have minded feeling a bit more powerful. Very realistic but not always fun.

There are a few other problems. It's a console port, so accessing your weapons is via scrolling or from a menu. I would have killed for weapon slots to be bound to keys. Driving is in first person and a bit clumsy but I have played much worse. Some missions are ludicrously hard to the point of frustration but there are only a few of those.

Overall, I would recommend this game in both SP and co-op form. Just don't expect a laugh a minute!

Serious Sam: Before the First Encounter (2011) *½**

SS:BFE is a prequel to the original game. It explains how our eponymous hero ended up in the ancient Egypt of the first game. The storyline is thin, and somewhat implausible, involving ancient alien buildings beneath the pyramids of modern day Egypt. Mental and his hordes have returned to Earth and want to destroy it, for some reason. Sam is trying to fend off the the aliens while trying to power up an alien device allowing time travel. A load of nonsense which is of no import because ...

Croteam have unashamedly ignored every modern trend in FPSs and produced a genuinely "Old Skool" game but with modern graphics. Like the original, you get loads of enemies and stupidly powerful guns (if a Cannon even counts as a "gun"!) to kill them with. There are loads of secrets, many of the "that's just silly" variety. No automatically regenerating health here. Instead you get old fashioned health and armour pick ups, just like the original game. In fact, like the original Doom!

Off-setting this old fashioned gameplay are much more realistic maps than the first SS. You play in the streets of Cairo, in the tourist areas of the Sphinx and Great Pyramids and underground in the hidden passageways beneath them. I liked the level designs a lot. The original SS was one arena after another. This does throw you into arenas for some Boss fights but, otherwise, the maps give much more scope for tactics. I had a lot of camping fun using the environment in different ways.

It was great fun for a one-off blast through the game but I had no great desire to play through a second time. That said, I did play through in co-op but that's a different experience, not least because of the way the game rachets up the number of enemies!

Good fun, absolutely true to the original but not much replay value.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution (2012) **½**

I never thought a "modern" (i.e. profit-driven) developer/publisher could ever produce a game as complex as the original Deus Ex. "Hidden War" showed how horribly it could go wrong. Fortunately, Eidos thought otherwise. This is a very worthy successor.

Actually, it's a prequel. In the original, physical augmentation was about to become "old tech". In HR, it's the "tech du jour". It's also very controversial with many people and organisations strongly "anti-aug". Our protagonist is head of security for Sarif Industries, one of the major aug providers. The game opens with an anti-aug terrorist attack on their HQ, in which you and a number of leading scientists, one of whom is your girlfriend, are killed. Well, you're not quite killed. You've suffered major injuries but are given extensive augs to help you survive.

The game proper starts on your first day back to work. You don't have time to get your legs under the desk before there's a terrorist attack on a Sarif manufacturing plant. You soon find that everything is not as it should be and we're in Deus Ex territory, again.

The game gives you all the choices and decisions of the original but with excellent modern graphics. For instance you have to get into a police compound. Upgrade your legs to jump over a perimeter fence. Upgrade your arm strength to shift a dumpster to let you jump over the same fence. Upgrade your torso to resist electricity and use an electrified pathway. Upgrade your lungs, find a way into the sewers and get through a cloud of noxious gas. Upgrade your social abilities and talk your way in. And, of course, there is a way of achieving it without any upgrades at all. Clever stuff.

You can choose to play the game with lethal or non-lethal weapons or a mixture of both. I tried both approaches and the result was satisfyingly different playthroughs. You have an inventory to manage which limits what you can carry. Weapons have specific ammo types, so choosing what and how much you carry is important. Aug upgrades are more easy to achieve than the original game but not as freely available as Hidden War. This is a good thing. Also, they give you an edge but don't make you into a superman. Also a good thing.

So why not as good as the original? Firstly, the developers included a number of traditional boss fights. You're trapped in an arena with saves disabled. The sort of thing you'd expect with Serious Sam. This is completely at odds with the rest of the game, where cunning and stealth can get you through most situations. This is especially awkward if you've built up a non-lethal arsenal and suddenly have to kill things. Even the devs admitted this was a mistake.

Secondly, the usual Deus Ex endings were too pat. In the original game, you made your moral choice and then played through to the end depending on that choice. Here, you get a choice of buttons to press and the game ends. I didn't find this particularly satisfying.

But, these two niggles aside, this was an excellent game and a worthy successor to possibly the greatest

video game of all time. Play it.

Rage (2012)

Yep. No stars. I'll explain.

This game is by id, makers of Doom and Quake. Quite a FPS pedigree. I was looking forward to it. It starts out fine. You have been put into a state of suspended animation before some kind of holocaust. You wake up a long time later and stumble out into a devastated world.

Does that sound like Fallout? Well, the area you're in is even called "The Wasteland"! So, yes, it's clearly borrowing from that game. You're picked up by one of the "good" citizens and driven to safety. You can make your mark by doing jobs for your new friends. Distinctly Fallout!

However, this similarity doesn't matter. It's obviously much more of a shooter. There are clearly no stats going on behind your gun. The landscape looks great and you're free to roam. Though nothing happens unless you've got the appropriate mission. It's a large area and you get assorted vehicles in which to drive around. Vehicles are third person but key controlled rather than mouse steered. I didn't like them, especially after Borderlands. And this is where I hit a show-stopper.

id were obviously putting a lot of emphasis on the driving aspects of the game. In fact, the MP element is all about driving and racing. I should have seen this coming. A couple of hours into the game, you are faced with a car race which you must complete to continue through the game. Now, a forum friend described the driving as "like controlling a rubber band on wheels with rocket engines"! I lasted about 15 seconds on the track before spinning off.

It didn't perturb those who liked PC driving games but for me the vehicles were completely uncontrollable. I could have spent a considerable time trying to master the things. However, I was looking to play a FPS not a driving game. Since there was no way around it, the game ended for me there. Only the second game in 20 years I haven't been able to play to the end.

It's a shame because it was shaping up to be a fun shooter but it wants to be a driving game. Pity it didn't say that in the marketing blurb as I could have saved myself a lot of money. I am a tad annoyed. Not recommended.

The Darkness II (2012)***

I'm in two minds about this game. There were lots of things I don't usually like in FPSs but some other elements were done incredibly well. This is a sequel to the original game that never made it to PC. Indeed this is very obviously a console port. But from the beginning.

You are Jackie Estacado, leader of a Mafia-style gang. You have reached this position at a young age by being totally ruthless but mainly because you are infested with something that calls itself "The Darkness". This gives you a pair of demon arms/tentacles and a foul-mouthed Darkling (goblin) to do your bidding. So, you can shoot with your normal arms, grab and throw with one of the demon arms, use the other for a vicious melee attack and, if anything is left standing, the Darkling happily rips their throat out! Your killing sprees feed The Darkness and you can "upgrade" your powers during the game. The problem is that The Darkness only functions out of bright light, so light becomes your enemy.

The story is about you trying to regain the love of your life, Jenny, who was killed in the first game. You also have a group of cultists trying to steal The Darkness from you. The story also implies that you are quite mad and confined to a mental institution and your life with The Darkness is just a delusion. A good idea but full of plot holes. That's not the end of the world but the story is told through endless cut scenes. All relatively well done but it felt like there was more storytelling than game.

The actual game suffers horribly from being a console port. I don't pay much attention to graphics but, on a gaming PC with a good monitor, they were very crude. I didn't like the design at all. The controls are very awkward on the PC. I was just getting the hang of it when the game ended! The game is very short, which is only made worse by the endless cut scenes. I was taken by surprise by the ending because there was no big battle or boss fight leading up to it. Many of the fights during the game were much tougher than the end section.

So what redeemed it? The gameplay, once you'd got the knack of the controls, was a lot of fun. You can hold a "shield" (car door, sheet of metal) with your demon arms, while shooting over the top. Your throwing demon arm turns everyday items into deadly missiles. Health is regained by ripping the hearts out of your dead victims. You can even throw the Darkling at an enemy. There are lots of ways to do battle and these are ever changing thanks to the upgrade system. If this had been designed for PC, had half the cut scenes

chucked away and doubled the length of actual gameplay. I suspect I would have rated it more highly.

A final word of warning, this is definitely an "18" game. The demon arm kills are extremely gory. It has the strongest language I've heard in a game. There is a brothel scene, which, in fairness, shows it as the depressing, miserable place it would be. In one scene, Jackie's murdered old aunt is thrown out of her coffin as her funeral is attacked. Not for kids.

All in all, not a great game but it passed a short time pleasantly enough. Give it a go, especially if you are used to console games.

Hard Reset: Extended Edition (2012) **½ (but read on)

This is the first game by Flying Wild Hog, a software house that boasts a number of ex-People Can Fly devs. It is a self-declared "old skool shooter". It sounded promising but I didn't enjoy it. However, unlike something like Duke Nukem Forever, which was just bad, I can see that it will appeal to a certain type of shooter fan and, within that appeal, it is very well done. So, what are the pros and cons?

I would like to start with the plot but it was unintelligible even by old skool shooter standards. Not that it matters. It seems that there is a worldwide conflict between humans and a race of robots. The humans have hunkered down into mega-cities.

Your character is a soldier/policeman defending one of these cities. The atmosphere is very cyber punk. All rain-drenched streets and robotic vending machines. The bespoke game engine renders these scenes beautifully. That said, there is little variation and one street looks much like the last (Doom 3 syndrome!). You have 10 weapons, each of which can have a further two upgrades, plus you can upgrade your health, shield etc.

The intention was to make this a hard-core shooter, which is certainly the case, but perhaps a step too far. First of all, nearly all the encounters are of the arena/enclosed space variety. Doors mysteriously lock behind you, drops become unclimbable etc. A load of robots spawn in and you blast away. There is little room for tactics or defence. Worse, your ability to climb is random. Sometimes the game allows you to climb tall containers but at other times you can't jump over a low fence. When you can jump, you often hit the dreaded invisible wall. You are just put into arena after arena.

A quick word about "secrets". They are truly in the old skool tradition varying from those discovered by exploration, through ingenuity, to dumb luck! However, because you frequently have no chance of revisiting an area, you never know if a secret you've spotted can be got in some way from where you are or will become available as you move through the map. You can be aware of a secret but never be able to get it!

So, we have tough secrets and tougher fights ... and the devs didn't include a save/load option! You fall foul of an enemy, die and then have to go back to the last checkpoint and repeat a load of stuff just to move on. I think a game like this should always have a save option. In fact, there is a quicksave/load built into the game but you have to bind it manually! When I found out about this, it certainly improved things.

Even then, this game is not easy. I started out playing on "Normal", which I do for all games. It was hard as heck, to the point of frustration. I was about to give up. Then a friend started playing the game on "Easy" and said he was enjoying it. Having chucked in "Rage", I didn't want to have completely wasted more money, so I thought I'd try on "Easy". Then it became too easy and I played through with few problems but little challenge either. The difference between Easy and Normal was vast!

Then I realised the devs' intention. Playing through on Easy, I got the feel of the weapons and environments. I learnt the best way to kill the assorted enemies. I knew where some secrets were I'd missed. You are then prepared for a Normal playthrough. Unfortunately, I didn't find the game anywhere near interesting enough to play it again.

Now, I know a number of gaming friends who like to play through similar games starting on Easy and working through the difficulty levels. For them, this would be an excellent game. For me, I only found it interesting enough for one playthrough and then it's either too easy or too hard. Hence, my score.

Borderlands 2 & DLCs **½ (2012-14)**

I was looking forward to this one and, at first, I wasn't disappointed but then ... I'll start from the beginning.

BL2 revisits Pandora five years after our adventurers opened The Vault in BL1. Hyperion have moved in to plunder Pandora of a new mineral, Eridium, released when The Vault was opened. Led by the head of Hyperion, Handsome Jack, they are committing genocide against it's old inhabitants. The heroes of BL1 now lead the resistance against Jack. However, the word is out that there is another Vault on Pandora and that brings new Vault Hunters to the planet.

You get to play one of four new characters all with new skills. In fact, that soon became five as Gearbox had allowed the necessary "hook" to introduce new characters, which they did soon after release. Character skill trees had been overhauled and were much more extensive than BL1.

Pretty well everything else had been upgraded, as well, without altering the addictive Borderlands game play. There are lots of new environments, beyond the BL1 brown desert landscape. There are many more enemy types, all with unique behaviours. Guns are also all new, with a look and feel tied in to their manufacturer. Missions are a little more complex with one task leading on to another but we're not talking "Fallout" here. It's still a shooter at heart. The storyline is much stronger. The script is very funny and backed up with excellent voice acting throughout. There are many more NCPs and everyone has a lot to say. You even get to fight alongside the characters from the original game. What more could you ask from a sequel?

I completed the first playthrough and I thought it was fantastic. Game of the Year stuff. Then I started the second playthrough or "True Vault Hunter Mode", as it's named. In BL1, the second playthrough continued the same level progression as the first. In TVHM, there is a distinct jump in difficulty with new tough, enemies well beyond level progression. Enemies were taking your shields down with a couple of hits. Tackling some, quite common, enemies had to be planned like a boss fight. This changed the game completely.

At the end of PT1, characters were beginning to get the interesting skills, further down their skill trees, and I was having huge fun experimenting with them. TVHM closed that down. It became a tedious "cover shooter". All your skill points had to go on gun damage and survival just to get by. I've played plenty of games on "Hard" but this was just a tedious slog. It was no longer fun, which, for me, is what Borderlands is all about.

Consequently, I couldn't be bothered to level up my characters to the level cap. Something I loved doing in BL1. This meant that I missed out on using many of the higher level skills that I'd really liked to have tried. For me, half the game disappeared.

The one redeeming feature is that I have many friends who are Borderlands players and the co-op is as great as ever. With friends to "revive" you, TVHM is much more viable and I did get to the level cap with my co-op characters. However, in co-op, you can't really try out silly things with your skills. The sort of stuff that kept me playing BL1 for so long.

If Gearbox had made PT2 more approachable for solo players, then I would have given this game 5*s without a doubt. To be fair, I only play most games through once or twice and taking a couple of characters though PT1 is still a great experience. Hence, the 4*s. But my expectations were high and I must admit I'm disappointed.

VERY BIG EDIT! - I just couldn't turn my back on a Borderlands game. I just felt I was missing something. I make no claim to being good at shooters but I couldn't understand why TVHM was causing me such a problem. I hit the Gearbox Forums and things became clear.

In the original Borderlands, character level was very important. You got huge pluses for being at a higher level than the enemy. Consequently, if you had a problem with a mission, leave it, level up, return and ace it. In Borderlands 2, an increased character level gives less of an advantage. In BL2, it's all about your gear. You've got to keep it at as high a level as possible. No longer will a Combustion Hellfire see you through half the game. You have to upgrade constantly.

I went back to my TVHM characters, sorted out their gear and I was off, again. I would now say that TVHM is my preferred play level and I've taken all the character types through it. UVHM is a different beast, again. See the DLC reviews below.

Consequently, I've increased my rating to 4½ stars. Why not 5? Well, even though I mastered TVHM I think Gearbox have to make up their mind as to what they're doing with difficulties. If you're going to have significantly different difficulty levels, like classic FPSs, then you should be able to play the entire game at your chosen level. That means getting to the level cap and gaining all the commensurate skills at that level. For me, Borderlands is all about XP and that next skill upgrade. Forcing players to play at a significantly higher difficulty to do that doesn't strike me as good design.

Character DLC - Mechromancer Pack *** (2012)

This time around, Gearbox left the requisite hooks in the Borderlands 2 code to introduce new characters. The first of these arrived only weeks after the release of the original game and was free to those who had the "Season Pass" (i.e. payed up-front for mission DLCs).

Enter Gaije the Mechromancer. She's a feisty teenager and genius engineer. She arrives on Pandora on the run from the authorities on her home world after a demonstration of her policing robot goes horribly, and

hilariously, wrong. I urge you to seek out her echo logs on YouTube. Brilliant writing and voice acting.

She is accompanied by her policing robot, DeathTrap. Gaige can digistruct DT from her robotic arm, her original arm having been lost in an unfortunate engineering lathe accident (again check out her logs!). This is her special skill. DT is a floating hulk of robotic violence with melee attacks, a laser death ray, an explosive clap and many other useful abilities.

Gaige's other skills include "Anarchy". This is built up by killing opponents but never manually reloading. As she gains Anarchy, her accuracy plummets but her damage rockets. A big shotgun, up-close-and-personal, with a high Anarchy count, melts the enemy. You can also build her up to take the best advantage of shock weapons and she can have a number of shock elemental abilities.

I have one particular problem with Anarchy. It's a great idea and gives you the chance to do something other than stand back and watch DT kill everything. However, if you quit the game, you lose all your Anarchy. So, you can spend a few hours gaming and build up a good stack of Anarchy but break for real life and you lose it all! Losing it on death is fine. Losing it while you're in FFYL is fine. But everyone has to close the game at some point and you lose all your hard work. They should have carried it forward.

Gearbox freely admit that they built Gaige for players who are not serious or experienced shooters. You can just release DeathTrap and let it do its thing for you. And that's where she fell down for me. I felt rather uninvolved with the action. Even a Commando can choose where he places his turret/s but DT has a mind of its own. Playable but nothing outstanding.

Campaign DLC1 – Captain Scarlett and Her Pirate's Booty *** (2012)

Many of Pandora's seas were drained by the corporations plundering its resources. So, now, pirates ply their "trade" on the sea beds. In this DLC, our heroes hear of hidden pirate treasure and find themselves working with the highly untrustworthy Captain Scarlett. You get new enemies from Pirates to the Sandworms that inhabit the (ex) sea bed. You also get to skim across the sea bed in a new vehicle, the sandskiff.

Its main problem is the simplicity of the mission structures. The majority are of the "find & return" variety and didn't feel like a cohesive whole. I must admit I quite enjoyed it, though, especially the Sloane Ranger, Captain Scarlett.

Campaign DLC2 – Mr Torgue's Campaign of Carnage ***½ (2012)

At the end of the main game, we discover that there are, in fact, many Vaults on Pandora yet to be discovered. Mr Torgue, purveyor of the finest explosive weapons, has found one of these Vaults. Being more interested in seeing things explode than the actual contents of the Vault, he organises a competition the winner of which will be allowed to open the Vault.

At the heart of this DLC is a series of boss fights but they are linked together with considerable flair and plenty of original side missions, something Scarlett didn't score so well on. Definitely worth a play.

Campaign DLC3 – Sir Hammerlock's Big Game Hunt *** (2013)

Sir Hammerlock is off on his expeditions again to find new creatures on Pandora and blow them to bits. Fortunately, he has you along to do the blowing to bits thing. It should be just a simple matter of mass creature annihilation but we soon discover that one of Handsome Jack's cronies is hiding out nearby. He has rescued Jack's DNA and is intent on creating a clone of our old foe.

The action is set on the Pandoran continent of Aegrus, a swampy, rainforestry parody of Africa or South America. The design is very beautiful, allowing the Gearbox artists to realise even more lush areas than the Highlands.

As you'd expect, you get loads of new creature types, some more original than others. There are some obvious re-skins. You also come across the local natives. Most annoying of these are the Witch Doctors who normally have elemental powers and can level up their tribesmen! Our new villain is possibly the worst evil scientist of all time and his dialogue always made me smile.

There's a lot to like here but I didn't enjoy it for no obvious reason. Perhaps it was all the "collection" missions? Like Scarlett, worth a play but it didn't get me involved.

Campaign DLC4 – Tiny Tina's Assault on Dragon Keep ***** (2013)

Gearbox went to town on this one! Tiny Tina now lives in Sanctuary, adopted by the Vaulthunters after

Roland's death. She ropes in Lilith, Brick & Mordecai for a game of "Bunkers & Badasses" (Dungeons and Dragons). Mordecai's reluctant but who knew Brick and Lilith were geeks! The game takes place in Tina's B&B scenario.

All the Borderlands mechanics are incorporated into a fantasy environment more akin to an RPG. Things like vending machines are re-skinned for that medieval look. Many of the characters from the main game crop up in new roles. Ellie as the Princess's bodyguard, for instance. But that's where reskinning ends. You get all new enemies in the classic fantasy genre, such as skeletons, orcs and, of course, dragons. The environments are in the same vein with forests, castles and mines. There are new guns, grenade mods and character mods. Despite the novelty, gameplay remains well balanced and it's a good length.

Throughout the DLC, you get narration from Tina and the Vaulthunters as they "play". This is excellent dialogue. It becomes clear that Tina is using the game to work through her feelings about the death of Roland and the events of BL2. This is sad and funny all at once. The cut scene at the end of the game is of all the Vaulthunters paying their respects at memorials to Roland and Bloodwing. Extremely touching and a very appropriate end to a great DLC.

Level Increase DLC - Ultimate Vault Hunters Upgrade Pack ** (2013)

In April 2013, Gearbox raised the level cap to 61, from 50, for all BL2 players. However, to get there, you really needed to get this DLC which allowed you to play the main campaign again with dynamic mission levelling. Unfortunately, it also introduced yet another increased difficulty level, UVHM, which only became available by beating TVHM!

UVHM is the "Very Hard" difficulty level of BL2. Enemies' health, shields and damage are significantly increased. They also gain health regen. Gearbox increased the effect of Slag significantly because to do any significant damage, you really need your enemies to be thoroughly slagged first. It's still all about your gear but to have any real chance, if you're of average ability, you need to have farmed some really good Legendary weapons. I don't enjoy farming but did what was necessary. However, I consider it bad game design if you can't proceed through the normal game and find what you need to continue.

I have tackled UVHM and taken characters to the level cap (even that set by the second UVHUP). Krieg aced it (see below). Maya succeeded by keeping the enemy under control and plenty of distance work. Axton was the next easiest, his turrets becoming very powerful at higher levels. Sal was a surprising slog, being dependent on his gear rather than an independent skill. I'm plodding through with Gaige but it's mainly about slagging enemies so DT can kill them, which is not particularly enjoyable. I can find no build for Zero that lets me proceed with any fun whatsoever, so I've given up!

I can only reiterate my point that if you have a difficulty system, then you should be able to complete all the game in your chosen difficulty. This held out the promise of more XP and skills but snatched them away by forcing you to play at an insanely hard level.

Character DLC - Psycho Pack (2013) *****

Yep. Count them. That's 5 stars.

Krieg the Psycho. That's "Psycho", as in the maniacs in masks who charge at you, buzzaxe in hand, with little regard for, well, anything really. But Psychos are made not born and Krieg escaped before he lost all semblance of humanity. Inside, he still has a distant voice keeping him under control. But on the outside, he's a maniac with a buzzaxe ... I'm pleased to say :)

Krieg is a throwback to the Borderlands characters like Lilith and, particularly, Brick. His skill is "Rampage". For a short amount of time he goes berserk, like Brick, and his Buzzaxe inflicts huge, and I mean HUGE, amounts of damage on the opposition. Every time he gets a kill, he regains full health. Too powerful? Not really.

Unlike all the other BL2 characters, he has no skill that lets him regain health over time. Consequently, he lives on the edge of death constantly. Get it right and he does more damage than the Gunzerker with two guns. Get it wrong and you're in FFYL in no time. An absolute joy to play, bringing back pure fun to the game.

His skill trees always kept me wanting the next skill point. Unlike most of the characters, I never placed a point for the sake of it. Every skill is worthwhile. One tree is all about building up melee and explosive damage. The second encourages you to keep on killing. The more damage you do the more powerful you become. The third tree turns you into one of those burning Psychos, spouting flame, and enhances your incendiary skills.

In fact, I was so desperate to hit the level cap I gritted my teeth and took him into UVHM. Lo and behold, he coped admirably. A little Slag here and there helped but it wasn't the constant requirement of the other characters. If all the other characters were as powerful, but well balanced, as Krieg, I would have far fewer reservations about the difficulty system.

Get Krieg but, whatever you do, don't play him first. The other characters will seem pathetic in comparison.

Level Increase DLC - Ultimate Vault Hunters Upgrade Pack 2 *** (2013)

This DLC extended the UVHM level cap to L72. It also introduced the concept of "overpowering" your character above the level cap. To do this, you get a new playable area of Pandora called Digistruct Peak.

The straightforward level cap rise just extended the slog that is UVHM. All my comments about the original pack remain relevant.

Overpowering is an interesting idea. The conceit is that Lilith & Tannis have built a new training ground for the Crimson Raiders, Digistruct Peak. Here you run the gauntlet of old, and some new, enemies, all digistructed by the ever demented Tannis. It was designed to be so tough that, if you manage to survive, you gain an Overpower (OP) level. You can complete the Peak eight times to reach OP8. OP levels effectively add to the level cap. So, OP1 = L73, through to OP8 = L80.

To keep things interesting, every time you go through the Peak you will meet different enemies in different places broadly. Also, at higher levels, new parts of the Peak open up to you. This worked well to avoid the feeling of pointless repetition.

What does this all mean? At an OP level, all your enemies will level up accordingly. This means you can end up tackling enemies at L82! On the upside, you will find weapons at the OP level, generated with appropriate level stats. Any damage your skill does will also level up. Unfortunately, your health doesn't. Also, you don't get additional skill points.

All in all, this is unfairly tough! I never got a character passed OP4 as a single player. One death and you have to start from scratch. However, the Peak really comes into its own with a party. With people around to revive you and with a spread of different skills, it becomes much more achievable. As I write this, I have 2 characters at OP8 but I have the advantage of a bunch of friends to play with. It remains very tough for the single player.

However, if you don't mind a bit of co-op, OP is good fun and lifts the rating of this UVHUP above the first.

The Head Hunter Packs

Gearbox made it clear that they were not going to produce further major campaign DLCs for BL2. However, they decided to continue adding to the game by releasing a series of mini-campaigns, each set on a single map. They called these the "Head Hunter Packs" (HHP) as each DLC ends with a boss fight that rewards you with a new head for your character. They decided to release these in conjunction with public holidays and theme them accordingly.

HHP DLC1 – TK Baha's Bloody Harvest ***½ (2013)

This one was released for Halloween. We meet up with our old undead friend TK Baha (see DLC1 of the original Borderlands). The Pumpkin King is wreaking havoc in the Hallowed Hollow and TK would like you to restore the peace. You get new enemies, candies that give you power-ups, a cleverly concealed secret area and an equally secret mini-boss. The final fight with the Pumpkin King was good fun and well balanced. Only a couple of hours play but that's all it claimed to be. Well worth the price of a pint of beer.

HHP DLC2 – The Horrible Hunger of the Ravenous Wattle Gobbler **½ (2013)

Thanksgiving. Mr Torgue is holding a tournament to defeat the Wattle Gobbler, a giant man-eating turkey! He lets the Vaulthunters in on the secret that the Wattle Gobbler is invulnerable, unless you can add a potion to its food – a giant pie. So you raid the kitchens, poison the pie and then take on the Wattle Gobbler. The fight through the kitchen was so-so. The battle with the Wattle Gobbler seems stupidly hard, at first, but once you realise how to deflect its attention from you, it's too easy. Finally, to have a second crack at the beast, you have to listen to Mr Torgue's grandma waffling at you for a *looong* time. I couldn't be bothered. Nothing like as good as the first HHP.

HHP DLC3 – How Marcus Saved Mercenary Day *** (2013)

Christmas. A trainload of guns has gone missing in Frost Bottom and Marcus is not happy. He wants you to find them. Along the way you meet the annoyingly cheerful Smaller-than-average Timothy who tells you Mister Tinder Snowflake has hijacked all the presents and probably the train as well. So, two birds with one stone. A perfectly acceptable fight through one Xmas cliché after another and quite good fun. The final showdown with Mr Tinder Snowflake, an evil giant snowman, was suitably tough. Nothing special but good enough value.

HHP DLC4 – Mad Moxxi and the Wedding Day Massacre *** (2014)

Valentine's Day. Moxxi wants to bring an end to the Zafford-Hodunk feud by making sure the wedding of Colin Zafford and Bridget Hodunk goes off without a hitch. Fat chance :) This was hilarious. Innuendo Bot has been drafted in as the Minister, Colin & Bridget are two goliaths, who, despite managing to make a baby, hate each other and the proceedings require you to kidnap the baby, amongst other things. The final fight with the wedding party is very well done. You can also go fishing for ever larger Threshers, which eventually opens a special chest. Not as clever as Bloody Harvest but it kept me laughing throughout.

HHP DLC5 – Sir Hammerlock vs The Son Of Crawmerax ***½ (2014)

Easter. It seems even Vault Hunters like a “Spring Break”, as they say in the States. Hammerlock has invited everyone to Wam Bam Island, Pandora's premier beach resort. The players are first to arrive, with the old Vault Hunters still packing for the trip. As ever, things get out of hand and Hammerlock is captured by some local natives to be sacrificed to the Son of Crawmerax!

You get Pirates, Native Warriors, a particularly nasty form of Varkid and some annoying crab-type creatures. The missions are fun and at the end of things you get the Son of Crawmerax. A tough fight which gets even harder, as it becomes a raid boss after the main mission completes. This being the last hurrah of BL2, I thought that Crawmerax might go out with the kind of “lootspllosion” his dad gave us. Sadly not and tackling him as a raid boss doesn't warrant the reward.

That said, still good fun. In particular the chat between the old Vault Hunters is brilliant. That alone puts it in second place in the Head Hunter series, behind the first DLC. Well worth a play, though.

Painkiller: Hell & Damnation (2012) ***

My old favourite franchise continues 8 years after the original game was released. The IP is now in the hands of The Farm 51, makers of the much enjoyed NecroVisioN. They still have many of the original Painkiller devs, from People Can Fly days, on their team. They have taken the PCF games and “re-booted” them using a modern (Unreal) game engine. What we have is a selection of levels from PK and BOOH brought up to date graphically and with some new and some old enemies to mix things up. We also get some new secrets and a new weapon, the SoulCatcher.

It's great to meet up with these old levels and they do, indeed, look better than the originals. There are fewer enemy types but they are all well realised. Most noticeably, many enemies move much faster than anything in the original and that certainly livens things up. The new secrets are fine. The SoulCatcher is a great new weapon, allowing you to grab souls directly from enemies and, in certain circumstances, possess them to fight on your side. Finally, levels load in seconds rather than the infamous original long load times. All well and good.

But this cries out to be compared with its progenitors. It all comes down to the Unreal engine vs the Pain engine. Unreal edges it on graphical quality but Pain was no slouch in its day and PK had a reputation for its beautiful graphic design. Unreal really limits jumping and climbing. Pain let you explore everywhere and, occasionally, completely outside the map! So many of the most memorable parts of the originals were based on some insane jumps. The Dock's cranes, anyone? In fact, it became clear while playing that many of the new secrets were included because the originals involved hard jumps which were now impossible.

The other big area where Unreal loses out to Pain is the number of enemies in play at any one time. Pain could have tens of enemies on the go. Unreal uses the trick of spawning in the next wave of enemies once you've nearly decimated the last. It works but it's not the same.

Lastly, the new game was developed with more than one eye on the console market and I don't blame The Farm 51 for that. Consequently, you get a limited checkpoint-only save system. Also, the new SoulCatcher is clearly aimed at the game controllers with considerably less accuracy required to hit your target.

Overall, you get a faithful and prettier but easier version of the original. I “Traumaed” this with little effort

which is not true of the original games, even today. That said, it was still good fun as an enhanced trip down memory lane. If asked, I'd recommend the originals but this is still worthwhile.

Dishonored (2013) *****

I took a break from Borderlands 2, which has been taking much of my gaming time, and bought the next FPS on my "to play" list, Dishonored. A complete contrast to Borderlands. Borderlands has my heart but this has my head, in a big way.

The game is set in a "steam punk" world. It feels like C19th Europe but science has moved faster than society. It is a watery environment, set in an empire made up of large islands. The technology has been driven by the use of whale oil as a fuel, powering lights, mechanical devices and a few contraptions yet to be realised even in our C21st. "Magic" exists but practitioners are persecuted by the secular world.

The action takes place in the capital city of the empire, Dunwall. You are Corvo, trusted bodyguard to the Empress. You have returned from a mission to try and find a solution to the rat-bourne plague that is ravaging the city. As you report on the mission, you are attacked by assassins with supernatural powers. You overcome, the Empress is killed and her young daughter kidnapped. You are promptly framed for the Empress's death, flung in gaol and sentenced to death. The day before your execution, you are passed a key to your cell. Time for some revenge!

Before I even talk about the gameplay, I have to acknowledge the excellent implementation of the game, particularly for the PC. You have a full save & load system with quick and manual saves plus autosaves at key points in the action. Your favourite weapons and skills can be freely assigned to 10 keys. There are virtually no invisible walls. I found one but I was doing something very stupid at the time! There's even a direct "quit to Windows" option rather than going through endless menus to leave the game. With games dominated by consoles, I never thought I'd see the like again!

Graphically, I love it. No effort has been made to make this game photo-realistic but the environment has been realised beautifully. Some of the views, especially from the rooftops, are worthy of, rather dark, ink and wash paintings.

But how does it play? Weapons consist of a pistol, crossbow (with various bolts), and a sword. The choice may be limited but they are all deadly. Fencing is handled quite well, with a simple parry/thrust system that still makes you feel you're controlling things. Unfortunately, the level of damage works both ways and the opposition can easily kill you with a couple of pistol shots. This is not a game for the run'n'gunner.

So, we're in sneak-'em-up territory. To aid you in this, early on in the game, you're "visited" by "The Outsider", a sort of local demi-god, who gives you the ability to gain certain supernatural powers. These powers can aid combat or help you sneak around the city. You find "runes" in your travels that can be used to help you develop up to 10 special abilities. Which you choose and how you develop them is up to you.

Your default ability is "Blink". This allows you to teleport over short distances (up to 5 metres-ish). Want to sneak past the open doorway. Blink. Want to get behind someone for a stealth kill. Blink. Want to get to the balcony across the street. Blink. Want to get on the rooftops? Blink. The game lets you do this anywhere within range. At one point, I Blinked onto a signal light hanging from cables above tram lines, ready to drop on an enemy below!

Blink, alone, would have been a great ability to have in a game but your other powers include seeing through walls, possessing animals and humans, summoning swarms of rats and even stopping time. These may seem overpowered, but they cost "mana" to use. The more powerful the ability the higher the mana cost and mana is hard to come by. However, abilities like Blink and Dark Vision (see through walls) cost very little, if any, mana. The game encourages you to use your basic powers but makes you think before doing something like stopping time! The system is balanced perfectly.

Alongside these powers, you can also find "Bone Charms". These can give you a constant boost to things like your speed or health. Which ones you find is randomly generated for each playthrough, which I thought was a nice touch.

Two other areas of gameplay deserve special mention. You get a decent jump height but when you are faced with an object that is higher than your jump but would obviously be climbable ... you climb it! It's incorporated seamlessly into the action and is a joy to use. Also, you can do it with any logically climbable object, not just the ones the game specifies. Secondly, you can take cover behind anything you like and the game lets you lean left and right to peek out at what's going on. I can't remember the last game that let me lean. Perfect.

A typical mission drops you off in an area of the city and after that it's up to you how you achieve your goals.

I've heard it described as "open world". I disagree. Open world, to me, means Fallout or Far Cry. The freedom you get in Dishonored is more like Deus Ex. I call it "open map". The environment design gives you a plethora of ways to carry out your objective.

As an example, you're faced with a gateway through the city walls protected by a force field. How to get through? Find the whale oil power source and disable it. "Hack" the control panel. Find a way to climb over the wall. Possess a rat and find your way through the drains. Make for the side streets and see if you can find a way around. Or possess a guard on your side of the barrier and just walk through! All of these come with a cost whether mana usage, an increased chance to be discovered or other dangers, particularly in the side streets.

Once you're through, you're faced with the City Guard. Go in, pistol blazing and sword in hand. "Windblast" them aside. Use "Blood Thirsty" to lethally melee them. Set a swarm of rats on them with "Devouring Swarm". Jump onto unsuspecting guards from above for a "drop assassination". Sneak up behind them and take them out one by one. Get up on the rooftops and sneak past. Blink from cover to cover to get by. Or just stop time and run past!

The game encourages you to be stealthy, wherever possible. The more people you kill, the higher your "Chaos" rating becomes and you will cause more rats and Weepers (sort of un-dead zombies) to appear, attracted by the bodies. It will also affect the ending of the game. That said, you get a decent leeway to kill people, if it all goes pear-shaped, before your Chaos gets too high. In fact, the game always gives you a non-lethal alternative, even when you have an assassination mission, but you may have to go out of your way to find it.

Can I criticise anything? Well, the storyline is run of the mill and you can see the plot twist coming a mile off. Also, it never really explains why you are chosen by The Outsider to gain your supernatural powers. Secondly, NPCs have to say things to let you know they are there, as part of the sneak process. However, what they say is limited and the repetition does grate. Otherwise, the voice acting is fine with Susan Sarandon and Chloe Grace Moretz in the cast. That's about it and neither are close to detracting from the brilliant game design.

I thought that Deus Ex:HR deserved the "Deus Ex" name but Dishonored is the true successor to that masterpiece. Why isn't it better than Deus Ex? Well, it doesn't manage the original's ethical ambiguity. The various possible endings of Dishonored do not make up for the genuine moral choice you have to make in that classic. Nevertheless, it is in the top five games I've ever played, nudging out Bioshock. Just play it!

Bioshock: Infinite (2013) ***

A new Bioshock, developed by Irrational and overseen by Ken Levine, the man who made the first two Bioshocks and the seminal System Shock 2. What could go wrong? Well, quite a lot actually. But let's start at the beginning.

You are Booker DeWitt, ex-army, ex-Pinkertons but now in dire straits thanks to your gambling habit. You owe some very dangerous people a lot of money. You are offered a job to wipe your slate clean. Find a woman called Elizabeth Comstock and bring her back to New York. What they failed to mention was that Elizabeth lives in Columbia – a floating city above the clouds!

First the good things. Columbia is a masterpiece of art design, even more so than Rapture from the first Bioshock games. Playing in DX11, it was breathtaking. Columbia consists of floating "islands". You move from island to island by floating shuttles or by sliding along "skylines", which are brilliantly implemented. It's populated by believable character models with some of the best facial animation I've seen since H-L2. Everyone chats away with very little script repetition, even from your assorted enemies in combat. The voice acting is excellent throughout. The story is first class, touching on political, social and philosophical themes in a serious way. It could easily have been an "art house movie". And that's where the trouble starts.

Infinite so wants to tell its story, that it has completely forgotten that it's supposed to be a game! There is no pretence of an "open world". It's an "on the rails" shooter, designed to take you through the plot. You wander around endlessly, being told the story through overheard conversations, audio logs and video clips. There is no tension or suspense. You get a few side missions, I use the term loosely, of the "here's a chest/cypher, find the key/code" variety, which means even more wandering around. On a couple of occasions I stopped playing through boredom! The only thing that alleviates this is the occasional firefight. So, if the only gaming element is combat, it better be good. Hmm!

Unlike the first two Bioshocks, you only get to carry two guns. Fair enough. That's realistic. Consequently, I soon settled on my preferred loadout, sniper & shotty, and didn't even try most of the many weapons the game offers. Worse, you can only carry a small amount of ammo for each gun. Stupidly, you can carry a small amount for *every possible gun* you could find but not use that space for plenty of the ammo you want!

Either let the player carry more ammo or introduce a simple inventory system. Two guns may be “realistic” but the ammo situation is not.

Portable health packs have also disappeared. You use any health-giving object as you find it. In combat, this means health is very important. Weapons do a lot of damage and you have no guaranteed access to health during a fight. I think Irrational realised this and, somewhat clumsily, introduced an auto-regenerating shield. Keep your shield charged and you lose no health. Since I'm a terrible, instinctive run'n'gunner, to preserve health, I tended to fight at a distance. The firefights didn't seem designed to cope with this. All the smaller fights became trivial as I picked off the enemy one by one. More boredom.

Vigors (sic) replace Plasmids from the first games and Salts replace Eve. Vigors tend to have two modes. One is an attack and the other a trap. For instance, the attack with “Devil's Kiss” throws a fire blast and the trap leaves a fiery patch on the ground which ignites if an enemy steps in it. These are good fun but given the way combat is designed, I only had to use them if I was faced with a “boss”.

Finally, the actual combat designs themselves. I've already said that most are trivialised if you stay back and snipe but it's much worse than that! The original Bioshocks were famous for the many ways you could take on a combat situation. Infinite chucks that out of the window and uses some of the worst ploys possible to make you play things out the way the developers want you to. Here are a few of the things I noted:

Doors mysteriously lock behind you, trapping you in the area of battle. In one case, Elizabeth picked the lock of a door, I saw the 'padlock' fall to the ground, I walked through the door and it immediately locked behind me. Staple fare of Serious Sam or Painkiller but not a “realistic” game like Infinite.

Some enemies are invulnerable until you carry out the action the game wants you to take. For instance, I'd found myself a nice sniping spot from which I could have cleaned up but a number of characters wouldn't take damage until I moved to the area the game wanted me to be in. Nothing to do with distance or my aim incidentally.

I'm on a shuttle moving between “islands” that is attacked by enemy vessels. I hunker down ready to defend until I dock. I take out the first gun boat and then wait. Nothing is attacking. Then I realise we have stopped for no reason, forcing me to fight the battle as the devs intended instead of choosing my preferred approach.

A sky hook I used the last time I was in an area suddenly became unusable when I was attacked. It would have taken me to a roof top from which I would have been near invulnerable.

These are some of the worst, cheap tricks I've seen in a game that has some semblance of being realistic, yet alone a game that has this pedigree.

The graphic design and implementation of Colombia is fantastic but let's consider the logic of the game world. You get vending machines selling Vigors and armaments. In Rapture, this made perfect sense. You had a population addicted to Plasmids and Tonics. Ryan's morality allowed total personal freedom, so, of course, everyone owned guns. But Colombia is an ordered society. It has a police force/militia in place to enforce good order. Not one ordinary citizen carried a gun or showed any sign of using a Vigor. So why are they being sold on every street corner?

Another thing that jarred was the clothing that took the place of Tonics giving you “passive” additional powers. What a completely ludicrous idea with no foundation in the technology of the game world. This isn't WoW with magic armour or, rather, magic trousers!

Finally, Elizabeth. She has excellent AI for a companion. You are told that she can look after herself (i.e. invulnerable), so not a huge escort mission, thank heavens! However, once she's in the game she becomes a part of the game mechanic.

Although she says she can't open “tears” at will, it seems she can! At one point, when she's running away, she opens tears at every juncture. Whenever you are about to get into a fight, all these tears with useful equipment appear. And how jarring is that!

The designers seem to have decided to get around the lack of ammo and portable health/salt packs by having her give them to you as and when, finding them from nowhere. Jarring, again.

In fact, once you rescue Elizabeth, she usurps you as the protagonist of the game. She drives the action. She is the one vital to the storyline. You could easily have the game with the player as Elizabeth and a gun toting Booker as her companion. Between the emphasis on story and the power of Elizabeth, it really undermines the concept of the player as the most important element of the game. This is not a good thing.

Now, you might think I've taken exception to Infinite because it's not the old Bioshock. I don't think that's true. FEAR is just a string of firefights but the game builds massive tension in between, keeping you involved. Half-Life 2 is probably the definitive storyteller and when you're not in combat you're solving gravity

puzzles or racing around on a hovercraft. The little known Cryostasis is closest to Infinite for pure, complex storytelling. Fights were only a part of the play as you desperately searched for the next heat source or used your psychic abilities to get the ship up and running again. In all of these, the player was constantly engaged and firmly at the centre of the action.

So, all of the things that I consider to be a problem with Infinite have been addressed successfully in other games. Given the game is from such a respected software house, I do wonder if there was a problem with time or money, forcing them to put the game out in this state. Thanks to the extraordinary graphics and storyline, I can just push this game into the 3* category but the gameplay alone doesn't warrant it.

Shadow Warrior (2014) ****

What an excellent little game this turned out to be! It's a "reboot" of the original Shadow Warrior arcade game. It sells itself as an old skool shooter but enhances that form nicely to bring it in line with modern FPSs.

You are Lo Wang, a freelance "fixer" working for whoever pays. You have been hired to be the middle man in the sale of a precious sword. That sale goes horribly wrong and, whereas you can take care of the "customer's" bodyguards, you aren't prepared for the powers of his supernatural aide. All hell breaks loose and you end up injured in a blazing building. You are saved by a supernatural creature/demon who "adopts" you. You need to regain the sword to square things with your, very dangerous, employer and the demon seems to want it for a different reason altogether. So, you set off together.

The demon explains that he comes from a parallel world called the Shadow Realm. Recent events have opened a breach between worlds and now demons are spewing through, also in search of the sword. These demons are considerably less friendly than your new partner. Better start shooting demons!

So, let's start with the shooting. No "you can only carry two guns" for this game. You get the classic old-skool arsenal and enough ammo to make good use of them. Nothing startling in the weapon types you get but they are all upgradeable in interesting ways, more of which later. Additionally you can make use of the heads and hearts of dead demons as weapons :)

However, the star weapon isn't a gun, it's the katana sword Wang carries. Melee is done exceptionally well in this game. The sword is a good melee weapon in itself but it can be upgraded for all sorts of special attacks. It was always my primary weapon and I only resorted to guns under duress.

The upgrade system lifts this game above the Serious Sam faction of old-skool. As you progress you find money, to buy weapon upgrades & ammo, gain Mana, to improve your skills, and find Ki crystals, to boost your mystical Ninja powers. Weapon upgrades can allow your flame thrower to lob fire bombs, let your crossbow fire remotely detonated grenades and let you use SMGs akimbo. Very satisfying. Your Karma skills improve your fighting abilities and, most importantly, gives your sword its special strikes. Ki gives you all sorts of mystical powers from healing through to levitating nearby enemies into the air. Altogether, these give you innumerable ways to approach any fight. A flexibility often missing in old-skool games.

The graphic design is good, whether recreating a modern day Japan or the Shadow Realm. Nothing ground breaking but well done. There is no pretence of an open world. This is an on-the-rails shooter and the maps take you from one end to the other. No problem there as long as it's fun along the way. That said, there are lots of secrets to find if you get off the beaten track. These are worth seeking out as they often give you boosts to Ki or Mana. Some are just for fun and lead you to Easter Eggs referencing the original game. The script and voice acting also deserves a mention. The storyline has a bit more depth than you'd expect from a game like this. The banter between Wang and his demon partner is often genuinely funny.

Finally, joy of joys, the game implements a proper save system allowing manual saves as well as providing autosaves at key points. If you want to save in the middle of a boss fight and resume the fight later, you can. And this is how it should be.

The game did have a few weaknesses, which stopped it from getting an even better rating. Special skills and powers were carried out by double clicking one of the WASD keys and then using L/RMB. This was obviously carried over from console controls, where it probably made sense. I found it clumsy, especially during the many busy fights you will encounter. For the PC implementation, they could have just been assigned to individual keys. There were too many invisible walls and it was never clear when the scenery was climbable. Many of the fights were of the "closed arena" variety. What did I expect from an old-skool shooter? But my touchstone for this kind of game is Painkiller and when I think of the scope for using the "scenery" that gave you, Shadow Warrior doesn't come close.

Lastly, an observation. Painkiller was made by People Can Fly. When they were absorbed by EA, many developers left. Significant numbers joined two software houses, The Farm 51 and Flying Wild Hog. Farm

51 went on to make the NecroVisioN games (loved them) and FWH made the hard core, old-skool shooter Hard Reset (worthy but flawed). This game looks like the follow-up to NecroVisioN in so many ways but was made by WFH. I suspect both NVN and Shadow Warrior came from ideas that were gestating back at PCF and, to some extent, appeared in PCF's Bulletstorm.

This is a game that was overlooked on its release, probably because of its humble, Eastern European origins. In fact, it will kick the rear ends of many AAA titles from the big players. Highly recommended.

Dead Island: Riptide (2014) ****

I liked the original Dead Island. I didn't buy Riptide because the reviews said it was just "more of the same" and didn't justify its "full game" price. However, I found myself with a dearth of playable shooters, so I thought I'd give it a try at a, now, much reduced price.

It picks up where the original game left off. You're in a helicopter escaping from Banoi island. Running low on fuel, you spot a military ship and land. However, this ship has been sent to investigate the virus and its commanders are only interested in you as a guinea pig. But playing with this particular virus in the confines of a ship is a bad idea and they soon have a zombie outbreak on their hands. In the subsequent chaos, the ship wrecks on the coast of Palanai. Unfortunately, the plague has preceded you. So, there you are, again, on an island overrun by zombies. So, as reported, "more of the same". Well, not quite.

You get to play any one of the original 4 immunes plus a new immune you found on the ship. My first surprise was that you could carry forward your characters from the first game. That means you've got all the basic skills and now have the chance to build down to the more interesting stuff.

Getting into the game, I noticed I had much greater access to IEDs from the very start. No longer do you have to jump through hoops to get a simple molotov cocktail. These, and many other devices, are available almost immediately. Then, I started finding ranged weapons. Not guns, yet, but flare guns, nail guns and fishing harpoons. Suddenly, I could take the opposition on at a distance if I wanted to.

When guns do appear, there are plenty of them. There's a military base on the island. More to the point, ammo, which you had to use so frugally in DI, is common place. Guns also felt more effective against the undead but that might just be because I used them more.

As I played, I realised I was levelling up at a surprising rate. My character ended DI in the mid-twenties. I added another 30 levels or so during Riptide, which is a shorter game. It was great to try out all the skills that were out of reach in DI.

That said, the zombies are just as tough as they were in DI. Get surrounded by three or more and you're dead. But, in Riptide, you feel more able to tackle them. In the original, running was always a better idea than fighting. That's not so true in Riptide. That does mean you lose the feeling of desperation that you had though out DI but does make it more "fun" to play.

They also changed the environment. Banoi was a playground resort for the rich, with a depressing slum area for the workers. Palanai is the destination of backpackers of more modest means. All tree-houses and camping sites. The main town is a post-colonial outpost and still has a crumbling grandeur. Big enough changes to make it feel different.

So, yes, all the game mechanics I applauded or derided in my Dead Island review remain in place but the feeling of the game is very different. Riptide feels like you're playing the game on "normal" whereas the original always felt you'd chosen "(very) hard". And that's not a bad thing. Very enjoyable.

Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel (2014) ****

This was a surprise! Gearbox had commissioned 2k Australia to develop a new Borderlands game based on the Borderlands 2 resources. They kept the development "secret" but word got out and they made a hurried announcement of its existence.

So what's it all about? The storyline sits between BL1 and BL2. Hence, "Pre-Sequel". It charts the evolution of Handsome Jack from ambitious Hyperion employee to the villain of BL2. After tricking the original BL1 Vault Hunters into opening a Vault, in BL1, Jack has discovered that another Vault exists on Pandora's moon, Elpis. He has convinced the Hyperion Board to let him have a space station to observe Elpis and Pandora ostensibly to evaluate them for expansion and development. This is the infamous "H" in the sky seen throughout BL2.

Unbeknown to the Board, Jack has hired some "Vault Hunters" to surreptitiously find the Vault for him. However, as they arrive on the space station, it is attacked by a rogue Dahl force. They wish to use the space station for their own purposes. Better sort that out first ...

So, you're a Vault Hunter again. The game gives you four "new" characters to play.

Nisha (the Lawbringer) is the cowboy (girl?) who will become Sheriff of Lynchwood in BL2. Her main skill is Showdown. It gives her an aimbot and high weapon fire rate & damage for a few seconds. While in Showdown, she is probably more effective than Sal during Gunzerk in BL2. Other fun skills include a bull-whip as a melee weapon and the ability to dual wield pistols.

Wilhelm (the Enforcer) is the most dangerous mercenary in the galaxy. He is addicted to robotic enhancements that eventually turn him into the man/robot of BL2. His skill is to call on his two "surveyors", an attack drone called Wolf and a support drone called Saint. You can choose to add robotic elements to him throughout the game which both appear in his in-game toon and cause him to sound more robotic.

Athena (the Gladiator) appeared in the BL1 Knoxx DLC. She was an elite assassin tricked by Atlas into murdering her own sister. She and the BL1 Vault Hunters overthrew Atlas on Pandora. Since then she has eked out a living as a sword for hire, albeit with a conscience. She joined Jack's band reluctantly. Her main skill is her Aspis shield. That protects her from all frontal damage and can be thrown as a weapon. Her sword is her melee attack. It can be developed to do high damage. It can also inflict a "Bleed" DoT, which means that you can strike an enemy and then let them bleed out. The Aspis can also be enhanced, to hit multiple targets when thrown a la Captain America.

Claptrap (The Fragtrap) is one of Jack's first experiments to weaponise an Hyperion robot. He got hold of the INAC claptrap from Robot Revolution (i.e. the original claptrap we meet at the start of BL1) for his experiments. The Claptrap's somewhat random AI made this almost impossible until Jack realised he had to work with its silliness. So, a Fragtrap runs a piece of software called "vaulthunter.exe". This evaluates the current situation and gives the Fragtrap Vault Hunter-like powers for a short time. This might be to throw down a mini-turret like Axton, or dual wield weapons like Sal. Of course, this can go horribly wrong and you might just send you and all your team-mates bouncing uncontrollably about the map! Many of Claptrap's skills help (most of the time!) the whole team and he is particularly useful in co-op. However, he can hold his own in single player.

All of these characters are designed extremely well and might be some of the best in the franchise.

So, what else is new? Elpis has even less gravity than Pandora and no atmosphere. To cope with this you get Oz (oxygen) kits. These not only supply you with the means to breathe but also provide the power to allow you to double-jump in the low gravity. While in the air, you can also choose to slam down sending enemies flying. All these things use oxygen so you're balancing breathing, flying and slamming. However, oxygen supply points are common so you have to try very hard to actually suffocate. These new game mechanics are brilliantly implemented.

You also get new laser weapons. These can work in many ways, from a continuous beam to a powerful railgun blast. Again, very well designed. Talking of weapons, a new machine, called a Grinder, is available that allows you to "grind" 3 similar bits of gear in the hope of getting one better item out the other end. You can use Moonstones to improve your chances of a good weapon.

Oh, yes! Moonstones! These take the place of Eridium in BL2. Your SDU upgrades are now purchased with Moonstones. However, they have other uses, as well. I've already mentioned the Grinder but they can also be used to open special, high-value chests. Lastly, Moxxi has opened a bar in the main Elpis town of Concordia. For the right amount of Moonstones, she can make you a Moxxtail, which will give you a power-up for 30 minutes.

Is this as good as its predecessors? Not quite. It doesn't have the scale of BL2 or the intensity of the fights in BL1. Within that, my biggest gripe is that it has to tell too much story to bridge the gap between BL1 and BL2, so I was often standing around listening when I really wanted to be playing. This was not near the scale of recent, story-heavy FPSs, though. Within that, I enjoyed the game very much.

However, from the wider Borderlands community, there was significant criticism. It seemed obvious to me that this was a game mainly based on BL2 resources to act as a stop-gap until BL3, or whatever, and to capitalise on all the money spent on BL2. A minor entry in the franchise. Many had, what I considered to be, unjustifiably high expectations. They wanted all new guns, new legendaries, raid bosses and all the things BL2 was big enough to encompass. When it was "just" a good game, there was much gnashing of teeth! So, if you lean to the "RPG" side of "FPSRPG", you may be less satisfied than me.

DLC1 – Character Pack – Jack's Doppelgänger (2014) ***

This is the first of "Jack's Doubles", seen in BL2. He uses the same character model as Jack and is also voiced by the excellent Dameon Clark who manages to make him feel different to the real Jack while

sounding just like him.

His skill is to call two digistruct Jacks to fight with him. These are quite powerful, especially if you take the skill that gives you a chance of generating a "Badass Jack". These do serious damage. It is arguable whether Wilhelm or the Doppelgänger have the more powerful "pets". Otherwise, he has skills that lend themselves to using grenades as a lead weapon. Finally, a special mention of the skill that gives you a weapon damage stack every time you pick up money. If you can get 999 stacks, you do massive damage. However, if you spend anything, including on ammo, you lose them all! Very well judged.

I liked the Doppelgänger a lot. Well up to the quality of the original four characters.

DLC2 – Arena and Level Cap Rise – The Holodome (2014) ***

A level cap rise is always welcome. On releasing this DLC, GBX/2K made a UVHM playthrough available to all players but this DLC was needed to continue to gain skill points. Progress was judged nicely and you tend to hit the new L60 cap on completing UVHM.

The Holodome got a mixed reception. Instead of the usual, compact "Circle of Slaughter," you got a much larger area in the style of the Eleseer map. This area is larger than even the arenas in the original BL1 Underdome. Consequently, you don't get the intensity of opposition other similar arenas have provided. You often have to go and seek enemies out rather than wave after wave coming straight at you. This didn't appeal to some players.

And, I must admit, when I first played the Holodome in TVHM, I was not impressed. It was easy, even by my middling standards. I, also, wrote it off until I played it in UVHM. Suddenly, it all made sense. The enemies were so tough, that the discrete firefights were just right. You needed to control the combat or you would die! The Badass round at UVHM was a real challenge and most enjoyable.

Arguably, the arena should have been designed to be fun at all levels but I accept they were trying to do something different and the gameplay at UVHM makes up for it. That pushes it into "****".

DLC3 – Character Pack – Lady Aurelia Hammerlock (2015)***½

The sixth playable character turned out to be Sir Hammerlock's sister, Aurelia. She was the torment of his childhood and probably only came to this part of the galaxy to annoy him. Whereas Sir Hammelock seeks out new creatures to study them, Aurelia seeks out new creatures to shoot them! She throws her lot in with Jack purely for amusement and the chance to kill lots of things. So how does she play?

Aurelia describes herself as "a stone cold bitch" and, to emphasise that, her skill is an Ice Shard. Thrown, the shard will seek out multiple enemies inflicting high levels of cryo damage. You can indicate its targets, in the same way as Wilhelm can control Wolf. Like Wilhelm's drones, the Shard is active for quite a time.

The Shard is enhanced by a skill tree that is all about inflicting cryo damage. My favourite skill from this tree was one that fires out an ice missile at anything that reduces your shields from fully charged. This freezes most low to middling enemies. Combine that with a fast-recharge shield and enemies are freezing all around you. This is the first skill tree in any Borderlands game in which I have completely filled out.

There is another tree that improves Aurelia's sniping abilities, reflecting her big-game hunting tendencies. The final tree is more problematic. An initial skill allows a member of Aurelia's team to become her "servant". This is a "symbiotic" relationship giving advantages to both Aurelia and the servant. The rest of the tree is mainly based on enhancing this relationship. Unfortunately, that means the entire tree is virtually useless if you are not playing co-op

Her scripting is hilarious and very different to the other characters. She considers herself superior to every character in the game, including Jack. She insults him and talks down to him on a number of occasions. Probably her best line is congratulating Moxxi on her "hilarious breasts"! The voice actor is going for stuck-up, English aristocrat but is a bit uneven. Still funny, though.

All in all, a great character to play. I didn't miss the Master & Servant tree playing solo because the other two trees were so interesting. She does have one weakness. Her health regen is heavily dependent on killing things with cryo damage. This means she takes care of mobs almost as well as Nisha but she can have a hard time against bosses, which unbalances the character. That said, definitely worth the money.

DLC4 – Mission Pack and Level Cap Rise– Claptastic Voyage (2015)***½

The title "Claptastic Voyage" is a reference to the 1966 movie "Fantastic Voyage" in which a team are miniaturised and injected into a VIP to save his life.

Jack has taken over as Hyperion CEO and discovers that his strangled, predecessor Tassiter, had hidden lots of corporate secrets inside the code of ... Claptrap the Fragtrap! Tassiter had put all kinds of security on this "H Source" making it impossible to get directly from Clappie. So Jack creates a perfect simulation of Clappie's code and digistructs the Vaulthunters inside it to find it for him.

The representation of Clappie's "mind" is brilliantly conceived. You travel along data streams. You find Clappie's Id and Ego amongst other personality traits. There are lots of IT references. When you access Clappie's memories, you find twisted versions of BL landmarks such as Fyrestone and Overlook. At one point you have to uncover one of Clappie's suppressed memories, "peeling" back one layer at a time to get the true story. Brilliantly done but very sad.

You get a new class of "glitched" guns.. These have the basic characteristics of a gun type (SMG, shottie) but can randomly fire in different ways. So, you might get an assault rifle firing like a shotgun. These guns can be very powerful. There are some obvious reskins but also a number of genuinely new enemies.

The game includes a new arena which allows the player to select the difficulty and other special properties. Think of the original Underdome but with you deciding on the conditions. Very original. It's also a tight playing area with lots of enemies, putting to rights the perceived problems of the Holodome. This is definitely in the same class as the Tiny Tina DLC so why the low rating? Well, everything was going swimmingly until the final boss fight.

BLTPS has been criticised for not having enough raid bosses by those who like that sort of thing. It hasn't bothered me at all. I don't know if Gearbox did it to satisfy these players but I considered the final fight to be a "raid" boss rather than a "campaign" boss.

What do I mean by that? Well, a campaign boss is one that should be a challenge but achievable by the average player with average gear. A raid boss is one that requires a co-op team or top-class gear. This was definitely a raid boss. It took me hours to beat this multi-stage fight. It was particularly galling because you can't get to the excellent arena until you've done this fight.

I won't be taking any other characters through the DLC solo because I really don't want to do this fight again. Given that I usually take many, if not all, of the characters through campaign DLC, this means I'm not getting anything like the value I'd normally get out of a Borderlands DLC.

If they'd have had separate campaign and raid versions of the boss, I'd have given this 5* but as it is, I can only give it the reduced rating.

Betrayer (2015)***

This is an interesting little game that tries to do something different but doesn't quite succeed. When I saw the description, I thought "this sounds like Cryostasis" and it's very much in that mould. However it doesn't quite live up to it's distant cousin. From the beginning.

You start on the shore of the east coast of America, in the early C17th, as one of the first colonists from Britain. You see your wrecked ship in the distance. But that's OK because you are to join an existing colony and your map tells you that it's not far away. As you make your way up the coastal path, a figure in red shoots an arrow with a message attached, warning you to beware. Sure enough, you find the various forts and outposts, built by the vanguard, deserted. Your job is to figure out what has happened.

Things get even weirder when you repair a bell in a one of the deserted settlements and, when you ring it, you find yourself in a parallel world. This is done very well. Normally you're wandering around a bright, verdant countryside. Then, on ringing the bell, you are plunged into the dark, monochrome Otherworld. I liked the graphic design a lot. However, special mention must be given to the soundtrack. There is no music, just natural, and unnatural, sound effects to emphasise the action. It gives a fantastic atmosphere.

Admirably, for a modern game, you are told nothing at the start. You have your map, with points of interest highlighted, your compass and that's it. It's up to you to figure out how the game works. I liked that a lot. It makes the first sections of the game even more mysterious and disturbing.

The game is relatively "open world", consisting of a number of maps, with transition points. You can travel back and forth between maps. In fact, the game has a very good "fast travel" system, avoiding the tedium of trekking everywhere on foot.

Primarily, you are exploring the maps, finding clues as to what has happened. Besides the "big picture", you also uncover smaller stories of the lives of the colonists. You can spot a common theme. The clue's in the game title!

There is shooting to be had. When you select game difficulty, their different descriptions are couched in terms of relative deadliness and that is the case. You can take very little damage and have to manage

combat quite carefully. It's part of the game's learning process to figure out the best approach. Weapons are assorted bows and flintlock pistols and muskets. And, yes, it takes an age to recharge a musket! You can find and buy better versions of these as you proceed through the game. As well as weapons, you can also find native charms that enhance certain abilities, such as letting you move faster or giving you more health.

Your enemies are not human, even outside the Otherworld. The Spaniards, that also populated the area, are grunting beasts and the natives are flaming ghouls. In the Otherworld, you face skeletal demons of varying kinds.

It sounds like good fun and, indeed, I enjoyed it, but it had some obvious failings. Firstly, once you understand what you're supposed to do, you find yourself doing exactly the same thing on each map with no variation. This leads to some very tedious gameplay.

Secondly, there is a game mechanic that requires you to find a shovel to dig up "buried treasure". Logically, shovel's should be common amongst colonists but, for some reason, they're not. You're half way through before you get a shovel and then the game changes completely! Until that point, you barely have enough coins to buy ammo, yet alone better gear. Once you get the shovel, and double back to the buried treasure sites, you're suddenly armed to the teeth with top-class weaponry and are as rich as Croesus! This makes the later stages of the game too easy, which only makes the repetition worse.

There are other minor niggles. The game gives you a resupply point on each map, and it costs to buy the things you need, but there's not actually anyone there to take your money! Why don't you just steal it? Also, the difficulty of combat makes stealth a desirable option. Indeed, bows lend themselves to that. However, enemies frequently just spawn in when you approach an objective, not giving you a chance to "reccy" the area and snipe. Those areas, where stealth was possible, were very gratifying.

So, full marks to Blackpowder Games for trying to do something different. However, the execution leaves a bit to be desired. That said, I'd still recommend the game as an interesting break from traditional shooters.

The Talos Principle (2015) ****

A first person puzzler in the manner of the Portal games. Like Portal, it was so good I thought it was worth a mention here.

The game starts with "you" materializing in some ruins. Looking at your hands (this is first person) you seem to be an android of some description. A portentous, God-like voice encourages you to go and solve the mysteries (read "puzzles") in his garden. So, away you go.

As you progress you learn that mankind has been wiped out by a slowly spreading "plague". This slow progression has given scientists a chance to create a computer to store as much of humanity's knowledge as possible. More importantly, it was designed to develop an AI to be the new "human". You seem to be one iteration of that process.

A surprisingly deep treatise on what it is to be human is slowly uncovered as you get on with the main business of solving puzzles. Do you obey the God figure? Do you listen to a voice in the machine that tempts you to do otherwise? Do you dare to go into the mysterious Tower? This could have been too pretentious for its own good but I thought it was pitched just right.

Since this was developed byCroteam, the makers of the Serious Sam games, all the different areas are realised with gorgeous graphics varying from medieval castles & keeps through to ancient Egyptian ruins. Sometimes you stop just to look at the vista.

Back to the puzzles. These are close to Portal quality. You frequently get that "this is impossible" feeling but they are all soluble. Each gives you a fixed set of tools to solve the problem. These vary from a simple box through to a device that lets you record your actions, replay and then interact with your recorded self. The latter makes your head hurt :D

However, unlike Portal, the puzzle sequence is not linear. Once you've opened an area you can return to it at any time. The "God voice" actively encourages you to give it a break, if you spend a long time on one puzzle. On a number of occasions, I was completely stumped by a puzzle, left it and did a few other puzzles and returned later to see the solution almost immediately.

Solving each puzzle gets you a "sigil". These are Tetris-style shapes that are used to unlock additional tools to solve problems or access further puzzle areas. You have to assemble the correct coloured pieces on varying sized grids of squares to get the new addition. These are puzzles in themselves.

But there's more. Each puzzle area contains golden stars. These are well hidden or in apparently inaccessible areas. To crack these you need the kind of mindset that finds obscure secrets in traditional FPSs. This is not me and I managed to get very few. Oh, yes. You can also get to puzzle areas that will let

you release helpers that can assist you in solving any particularly tough puzzles. And there are well hidden Easter Eggs. Wow!

So, all in all, this is what you get. 3 main hubs. Each hub has 7 puzzle areas. Each puzzle area has between 3 and 7 main puzzles plus 1 to 3 golden stars to find. In addition, each hub also has a "Helper" puzzle area usually involving a "normal" puzzle and a number of sigil puzzles. Each hub also has a puzzle area only opened with enough golden stars and these lead to a further three puzzles. The final Tower has 5 puzzles to beat to get you to the top. There is a sixth if you solve all the puzzles in the golden star areas. When you reach the top of the tower there are yet more puzzles as you progress to one of the three endings. And there are innumerable sigil puzzles, throughout, to let you progress.

You get the idea that this game is BIG. I solved all the main puzzles, released all the Helpers and got to the top of the Tower. This opened 2 of the 3 endings for me. That took me 54 hours of gameplay. Portal 2 took me 19 hours. I think that puts it in perspective. If I'd have gone for all the golden stars, to get the third ending, I guess that would have added around another 20 hours of play.

Just like Portal, The Talos Principle isn't a shooter, and this document is about shooters, so only 4*s. However, as a puzzler, I'd give it 5.

Dying Light (2015) **½ / **½**

This is going to be the strangest entry I've ever added to my little personal log, as can be seen by the score. I'll explain.

I always thought Dying Light would be the true successor to the Dead Island games, which I thoroughly enjoyed. Dead Island 2, from a different developer to the original, looked awful and was never released. I was right. Dying Light takes the basic mechanics of Dead Island and improves them in every way.

You are Kyle Crane, ex-special forces, hired by an international security agency, the GRE, to retrieve a secret file from the Middle Eastern city of Harran. The problem is that Harran has been hit by the, now-traditional, zombie virus and has been completely isolated by the state government. You are parachuted in but nothing prepares you for the chaos in the city. You are bitten by a zombie but saved by a local group of survivors. Unlike Dead Island, you are not immune. However, a drug, Antizin, can suppress the symptoms and stop you from "turning".

Much of the plot is driven by the need to get antizen for yourself and the other survivors. This introduces you to the villain of the piece, an ex-government fixer, Rais, who has become a "war lord" in the devastated city. He's appropriately nasty and it's good to have a real antagonist to help drive the story, something the Dead Island games lacked. Also in the plot mix are the nature of the contents of the missing file, two scientists working on a cure but trapped on different sides of the city, the real aims of the GRE and the state government's intention to bomb the city flat! It was as good a storyline as you could hope for in a FPS.

But what about the gameplay? Arguably, there is nothing massively innovative but the game puts together all its elements perfectly. The big change over Dead Island is the introduction of "parkour". There are a LOT of zombies in this game, tens possibly hundreds in some areas (really!). If you try and fight your way through, you're going to die. Instead, the game gives you the best free-running system I've ever come across in a FPS. It makes climbing and leaping from roof top to roof top a positive joy. This only gets better when you get a skill allowing you to use a grappling hook to zip from place to place, like Blink in Dishonored.

Talking of skills, you get three skill trees – Survival, Agility and Power (combat). You earn separate types of XP for each. So, the more you fight the more Power skills you get, the more you run, jump and climb, the more Agility skills you get etc. The skill trees are structured in such a way that each point tends to open a new skill. You no longer add points to be better at the same skill. This makes skill development fast and satisfying. A nice touch is that if you die, you lose Survival Points, slowing you progression in that tree. A much better idea than losing cash.

The game gives you an interesting selection of zombies. All shambling zombies are potential "biters", grabbing you and immobilizing you until you fend them off. "Virals" are fast, dodge and can climb up buildings like Spider-Man!. Special mention goes to Demolishers who can charge and ram you, lash out with a punch that sends you flying or just stand there throwing cars or boulders at you.

When night falls in Harran, everything gets tougher. In particular, "Volatiles" emerge from their nests. These are fast and inflict devastating amounts of damage. Once they have you in their sights, they will pursue you relentlessly. Night is so dangerous in Dying Light that XP is doubled. Hence the game's marketing tag, "Good night and good luck".

You do get weapons that are up to the job. Combat is very similar to Dead Island and tends to be melee focused. However, guns do actually work in Dying Light, unlike Dead Island, and definitely have their uses

against Rais's thugs. Melee weapons can be improved using items you find in your travels and the right blueprint. In addition to blueprints, there is a modification system. These are one-off devices you can add to a weapon to seriously increase its power but are not reusable. Blueprints and mods are usually earned as rewards for missions but not exclusively so.

Missions are much improved over Dead Island and, indeed, many other games of this genre. There are very few straightforward "do and return" missions. They normally expand to take you off in all sorts of unexpected directions.

As well as traditional quests you also get other mini-missions. Supply drops are parachuted in randomly and you can try, when you see this happen, to get to the drop site before Rais's men. There are more random encounters where you can help other survivors, There are challenges, which normally require you to carry out a task against the clock. There are protection (escort) missions, to help a survivor get from A to B. Finally, there are "Quarantine Zones", which are repeatable missions in particularly tough areas. There is always something to do in the game. There's no "down time" as you wander across the map from mission to mission, like Fallout or STALKER.

As you can probably tell, I absolutely loved this gameplay, You choose which mission to tackle, when and how. Do you go out at night, for the extra points, or during the day, to minimise the chance of dying and losing points? Do you take to the streets and fight your way through or take to the roof tops avoiding combat completely. And when you get to your goal, do you go in flailing, snipe from on high or, even, stealth your way through? This is a level of flexibility lacking in so many modern games and I loved it. It was well on its way to being in my top ten FPSs and well worth the ****½ rating.

But then the end game happened. Rant ahead.

Like most open world games, there came a point where side quests ran out and you had to play the story missions, which turn it into a classic linear shooter. Dying Light handled this really well with some great fights and climbs as you follow the story. Finally, you reach the half -built tower block on top of which Rais is waiting to be "extracted" by helicopter. The game gives you the "you can't turn back" warning. Then it went to pieces.

I expected that message but, disturbingly, it also said that the game could only be finished in single player! I have some regular co-op partners and we like to do everything the game offers. We could have put tens of hours into it, only to be told we can't finish the game together. WTF, to coin a phrase.

But I was in single player and that's how I judge a FPS. In I went. The first thing I noticed was that my grappling hook was not available, for no good reason This had become a vital part of the way I liked to play, so that was disturbing.

The first area was full of zombies. I would normally have grappled around them but I was geared up for combat and, with a bit of stealth, they presented little problem. I slid down a pipe into the sewers and then everything went Call of Duty.

You are presented with a narrow sewer, full of Volatiles and other zombies with a load of jumps, which, if you fail any of them, kill you instantly and you have to start all over again! After I died the sixth time, I thought I was missing something, given the nature of the rest of the game. So I hit YouTube.

It quickly became clear that you were supposed to run through that section, distracting the opposition with flares or whatever and doing the jumps with momentum. Well, I hadn't played the rest of the game anything like that. I'd stealthed my way through and was failing these jumps because I was supposed to be sprinting. That is, it had been designed to be played in a particular way. Typical of so many modern games but not in keeping with what I had come to expect from Dying Light.

I carried on watching the YouTube vid and I'm pleased I did. You then got some more enemies, which I could have coped with. But then you get a very hard parkour section, no grappling hook remember, which is insta-death if you make a mistake and you have to start all ... over ... again. Platform gamers might like to learn and repeat these sections but I play FPSs and I don't!

At one point, the arm of a crane, along which you are running, collapses, and you have to jump and grab the wall opposite. Do it wrong and you die, respawn at the beginning of the crane jump and then do it again and again until you get it right. This is not exciting. It is tedious beyond words.

When you complete this climb, you finally meet your nemesis, Rais, on the top platform. Ah, ha! The final boss fight! No. The game cuts to a cinematic with some, Heaven help us, QTEs to finish the game. I would have put in over a hundred hours of gaming to get to that point and would have had to have finished it by pressing some random buttons in the right order. I am a mild mannered man but <expletive> off!!!

I have ignored games recently because I knew they had QTE endings. Having watched the excellent general gameplay, in various gaming vids, before buying Dying Light, it never occurred to me that it would

end in this way.

On the one hand, I've had over a hundred hours of fun from this game but, on the other, the complete change of style at the end means I'll never complete it. If you can put up with the horribly constrained, cinematics heavy, QTE ridden games that pass for shooters nowadays, then the ending won't worry you. But it poisoned the entire game for me, hence the **1½.

Fallout 4 (2016) N/R

Another Fallout game. I happily played Fallout 3 and New Vegas, so I was looking forward to this. However, I didn't finish it, so I don't feel it's fair to rate it. Here's why.

The story starts with the nuclear war and more people duped into the experiments taking place in the Vaults all over the US. In this case, you are cryogenically frozen along with your spouse (you can play as a male or female) and baby. You become conscious briefly to see your spouse killed and your child taken away. You regain full consciousness to find all the other Vault occupants dead in their cryogenic pods. You break out of the Vault intent on finding your child.

We're back in solid Fallout territory here. A huge map to explore, the usual mutated creatures to fend off and the remnants of humanity struggling to survive. As ever, you can go where you like and do what you want straight out of the Vault.

The game includes a massive crafting system, not just for guns and armour but to build whole settlements, including dwellings, farming and defences. The mechanics for this were very well designed, allowing complex environments to be built with relative ease. Some players have taken this to extraordinary lengths building complex structures and virtual cities.

The skill levelling system had been changed. I didn't really remember the previous system but I was fine with the new one. You still have to decide on how you want to play your character at the start, rather than as you go, but that's not a problem.

For the shooters, like me, they finally gave us weapons that could be used effectively without VATS. I didn't use VATS once and was getting headshots quite successfully.

Given all that good stuff, why did I have a problem? First of all, I put over 60 hours into this game before I gave up, so I gave the game a fair chance. The issue for me was a move of emphasis to the crafting and community building aspects of the game. I'm sure the RPGers loved it but as someone who was looking to the game as a FPS, it didn't deliver. Even the quests that involved a bit of gun play tended to be in support of establishing these new social structures.

If you wanted to ignore all the RPG stuff and play the game as a shooter, like its predecessors, I found I just became bored. It didn't help that I had just played Dying Light, which made the RPG stuff secondary to the action, where something was happening all the time. I didn't find following the main storyline, without all the RPG elements, compelling enough. Just wandering around with random encounters became tedious.

For me, it has moved too far from the FPS genre. However, as an RPG I can see it's an excellent game and I think a mediocre rating wouldn't do it justice.

Blood & Bacon (2015) ****

This game cost £0,79 on Steam at a time when AAA titles cost £40! One of my regular co-op buddies pointed it out to me and suggested we give it a go. It was absolutely brilliant!

A pig farmer has accidentally started a pig zombie apocalypse on his farm by putting steroids in the feed. You can tell this isn't a game that takes itself seriously! Your job is to wipe out the threat by shooting an enormous number of zombie pigs. You must survive 100 days (rounds) of increasingly difficult zombie pig attacks (I can't believe I'm writing this :D) to get back to business as usual on the farm.

You start each day in The Farmer's Barn. You know it's The Farmer's Barn because the pigs have ripped his leg off and staked him half way up the barn wall with a pitchfork! He, sort of, tells you what's going on in an hilarious, depressed monotone apparently ignoring the fact that he's pinned to a wall. Inbetween the exposition, he comes out with terrible farm themed puns.

In this barn you can pick up your weapons for the day. You are allowed two guns, a hand gun, with infinite ammo, and a much more powerful secondary gun. The Farmer increases the choice of weapons as the game progresses. You get a good selection from a basic repeater through to a missile launcher. One of these is a paint ball gun, which is particularly useful against coloured zombie pigs (I still can't believe I'm writing this :D).

The action takes place entirely in The Farmer's farmyard. You can see fields and woodlands beyond but invisible walls keep you in the yard, which is, effectively, an arena. The yard contains The Farmer's barn, which he locks when you leave; another large barn, just for cover; two water pumps which give you health but can "dry up"; a "pen" in the centre of the yard, bounded by an electric fence; the generator hut, which powers the electric fence and last, but not least, the Grinder.

The Grinder can supply you with handy additions to your basic weapons with everything from additional ammo to a potion to instantly revive you if you're down. The Grinder is charged by pushing bits of dead pigs into its rotating blades (seriously :D). Each lump of meat charges the grinder and its up to you how you "spend" that charge. Ammo and grenades are relatively cheap but the instant revive will cost a large chunk of its charge.

Each day you face a different variation of zombie pigs and attacks. You might get a load of tiny, fast moving piglets, which are hard to hit, or herds of skeletal pigs stampeding across the yard. Most days you get one use of the electric fence which will fry any pigs in the pen. . Otherwise, it's down to you and your guns for some great, "old skool" shooting.

Time of day can vary from bright daylight through twilight to night when you have to rely on your torch to get you through. Every now and then, The Farmer gives you a "Revenge Day" during which your weapons do huge damage. Every tenth day you get a boss fight. These can be tough. As you can imagine, Day100 is quite a challenge.

There are things wrong with the game. The graphics are basic, to say the least. It feels like you're back in the 90s. The UI and menus are terribly designed. It's as if the devs had never seen a modern shooter. But all this is forgotten once you start blasting pigs :)

You get the feeling that the developers are working out of a bedroom, somewhere. However, they are constantly improving the game. They use the Steam forums as their hub and always respond to questions and comments. Only two person co-op was allowed when I played but they are already expanding this to four. That would be great fun.

Can I give a crude, indie game like this such a good rating? Well, I spent 28 hours on Bioshock: Infinite and it was a chore to slog through it's awful gameplay. That was a full price, AAA title. I spent 19 hours on Blood and Bacon. It doesn't have the posh graphics or pretensions of Infinite but the gameplay knocks it for a cocked hat. And it cost 79p. Easily worth four stars.

Glossary

AI	See "Artificial Intelligence".
Artificial Intelligence	Of the people/creatures controlled by the game engine. In early games, you could out-think the AI and make your opponents do silly things allowing an easy kill. Nowadays, AI is very sophisticated, allowing opponents to hide, wait to hear you reload or work together against you. Damn!
Boss	A particularly nasty opponent, often a one-off, that you meet at the end of a particular episode or mission.
Camping	In multi-player, it can mean staying by a spawning point and blasting players as they appear. This is frowned upon! However, more generally, it means finding a good defensive position and fighting from there.
Checkpoints	A feature of console games which saves your progress automatically but at a point of the game's choosing, not yours. As more games are designed for both platforms, checkpoints often appear in PC games. This is ok if you can also save as required but, if not, it can be frustrating having to go back and repeat sections.
Co-op(erative) Play	In SP, when the artificial intelligence in the game allows game characters to work with you. Also a form of MP gaming where teams of players work together against another team or the game.
Cut scene	An animated sequence which usually progresses the storyline or is for amusement at the end of a 'chapter'.
Downloadable Content	When I started this document, the Internet barely existed. You bought an expansion pack on disk, like the original game. Now the Net is the prime route for buying additional content for a game
DLC	See "Downloadable Content".
Episode	A specific kind of Mission Pack. Instead of following up a successful game with another major release many months later, developers have started to release a number of shorter games sooner but over a longer period. Think 'TV Programme' as against a 'Movie'
Expansion Pack	See "Mission Pack"
First-Person Shooter.	A game where you see the world in the first-person and usually with a gun (or weapon of your choice) in hand.
FPS	See "First-Person Shooter" and "Frames per Second"
Frag	In MP, a 'kill' against the opposition. However, it's become a verb meaning to kill the enemy whether in MP or SP.
Frames per Second	The number of images per second your computer can generate for a particular game. The more complex and graphically rich the game, the harder the PC has to work. Drop below 25 fps and the game starts to look jerky. A very good frame rate may also mean things like jumping or aiming are easier.
Game Engine	The underlying software that handles movement and environment physics. Look, feel and gameplay is then added on top. One engine often powers many games. Even Half-Life and MOHAA were based on the Quake engine though they look nothing like the original game or each other.

Internet Play	See "Multi Player".
MP	See "Multi Player".
Multi Player	Playing against characters controlled by other players, as against the game's AI, over the internet or a local network.
Mission Pack	If a game turns out to be a commercial success, the developers often follow up with another release, adding a new scenario/s on to the original game. Originally, you needed the original game to play the expansion but these are now often released as 'free-standing' games (also, see Episodes)
Power-up	Anything you find in a game that boosts your abilities, typically your weapons, health or 'armour'. In early games they would miraculously just be there. In later games they tend to be placed logically in the game world.
QTE	See "Quick Time Event"
Quick Time Event	Points in the game when you are required to press a key, or sequence of keys, often repeatedly, to overcome the situation. These originated in console games where the restrictions of a console implementation don't allow the player to take a freer action. For instance, a QTE may occur to allow you to climb up a rock face after a fall. A PC's resources would allow the surface to be climbable. I hate these in a PC game!
Rag Doll (Physics)	The game engine's ability to replicate real-world physics particularly as applied to characters or monsters. Where characters once had a fixed "death animation", now they're blown around the map (or staked to walls in the case of Painkiller!) like rag dolls.
Sandbox	A description given to a game that allows you to move around a large area independently. There's usually a major plot line to follow but also lots of minor tasks/quests you can do depending on where you wander. It was pioneered or, at least, perfected by the "Grand Theft Auto" series of games and features in many "role play games". STALKER was the first FPS to do this.
Secret	From the days of Wolfenstein 3D, it has become traditional to put useful items in hidden or hard-to-get-to areas of the game map. These can be overt, like those in Quake or Painkiller, or more subtle, like the diamond suitcases in Far Cry 2, which prompt you to fully explore the map.
Single Player	This is the form of the game when you play against the games's planned scenarios and game-controlled characters. Most FPS's attempt to use the game to tell a story that you can play through. This can vary from the complex (e.g. Deus Ex) to the almost non-existent (e.g. Serious Sam)!
SP	See "Single Player".
Spawning	Most games put people/creatures in particular places for best effect. However, they may only appear after particular actions on the part of the player. You may grab the power-up but suddenly have a lot more enemies to fight! It's also used to continually generate nasties in a particular area (re-spawning). This can be used to provide a challenge if you have to re-trace your steps or to make you keep moving through an area.
Stealth Mission	Early FPS games were all about shooting anything that moved. Later games introduced scenarios where you have to sneak around with gun in holster (or, at least, silenced) to be successful.

