

RELOAD MAGAZINE



NIGHTMARE WULF REAPER

ROGUELITE BLOODBATH!

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A man who adores an unrefined gem. You can check out my other work in Retro Format, in addition to several announced and unannounced 'zines.

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FOREWORD

Welcome to your very first taste of Reload Magazine.

Reload Magazine is a project by FPS superfans for FPS superfans. We tracked down some of the most notable and capable writers and brains in the scene and brought them aboard to get you their insight on the latest releases and retrospective topics. You might not know all our team members yet, but trust us, you will.

We've been toiling away to bring you the very best content, diving deep into upcoming releases, stellar indie projects and interesting topics for you to feast your eyes and brains on. Please bear in mind this short sample magazine is but a small slice of what you can expect in our mainline issues, which will be 100 pages a pop!

With this being but a sampler of bigger things to come, we'd love to hear your feedback! What do you love, what do you hate, and what do you wish for in future issues of Reload Magazine? Make sure to track us down on Discord and Twitter to let us know!

It's a real pleasure watching such a fantastic community come together as a result of our shared love for the FPS genre and indie scene, and we hope you'll stay with us for the long haul.

Zach Murphy
Founder
@RELOAD_MAGAZINE

LANDING PAGE

EARLY BIRDS



SHROUD

Quake-like Shroud is super early in development, but we're on the edge of our seats already. It's dripping in visual atmosphere and the use of heavy dithering and a low draw distance really drives the aesthetic home. Rekkimaru (@ShroudDev) has filled the game with beautiful weapon models – we can't wait to get our hands on it.



M.I.A.M.I.

Polish-developed M.I.A.M.I. looks cracking. Heavily inspired by Maximum Action, @SamuraiOutcast have filled this project with slow-motion, exploding helicopters (and enemy weapons!), and tasty rocket launchers. We don't know too much about this one, but even that is enough for us to be wowed.



STEFAN D FPS PROJECT

Stefan Dolidis (@notstefand) is working on a stunning project in Unity that allows you to use the bible as a weapon and perform voodoo on your foes using detached spines! You play as an occult detective and must progress through linear levels, blasting foes and collecting items. Super pumped to see this one grow!



SHELL SOLDIER

Being developed by @CatHuntTree, Shell Soldier is oozing with its F.E.A.R. inspiration. Putting you in the role of "The Operator", Shell Soldier will pit you in slo-mo firefights against the Silver Phoenix terrorist group, with a heavy emphasis on tactical gunplay and particle effects. Sign us up!

HELLSLINGER

DEVELOPER: HELLWORKS TEAM - PUBLISHER: HELLFORGE STUDIOS - WRITTEN BY: DALE HIRSTEIN

I knew I would like Hellslinger upon even just booting the game up. Running on the ever-present GZDoom engine, the game's visual style is striking and instantly stands out from the crowd. I'd describe much of the texture-work as having a cel-shaded aesthetic, but the color palette helps this feel organic and natural; lighter tones help contrast the heavy shading present on many environmental details, and it makes the game as a whole really strike a confident niche in terms of its presentation. In the build I played, two characters presented themselves to me, the titular Hellslinger herself, and Veronika, who appeared to wield more modern and identifiable weaponry. Hellslinger plans to have a total of four playable characters on release, all of whom come equipped with their own entirely unique arsenals and abilities.

More on that later; in the meantime, the Hellslinger herself was to be the first character I gave a whirl, and gave me all the more reason to find the concept of even more guns in our future exciting, because the number one thing Hellslinger positively nails in my experience is how incredibly satisfying the arsenal is. The spriting and animation work on the various tools of death and destruction you can find yourself wielding is nothing short of stunning. Reloading, firing, and operating the weapons of your character looks smooth as silk and greatly heightens the experience. I think my personal favorite to pilot was the Gatling gun, both because I'm a chaingun connoisseur and because the little details on this thing make it really shine. Some sort of ejection port along the top of the casing of the weapon flares with little jets of

flame as you chew through your ammo supply, and the cherry on top is your character's hand: A vein pulsates on the top of their hand right as you fire, showing your character is gripping the weapon harder to compensate for the sizable recoil generated by firing what logically would be a nearly 200 pound brass beast.

To supplement the high-octane action, Hellslinger has a variety of mechanics present – both in movement and gameplay – to keep the player mobile and in the action as much as possible. Placed ammo is somewhat rare on the map I played; this is remedied by a mechanic somewhat reminiscent of Doom Eternal's chainsaw. The Hellslinger passively generates a stick of dynamite that explodes on contact with an enemy, or – if impacting the map geometry – lies burning down its fuse for a few moments before detonating. Any enemy damaged by the explosion will drop an ammo collectible on death, incentivizing you to save a stick of dynamite for large groups of fodder enemies to restock. I actually ended up preferring this to the chainsaw in the short term; it rewards creativity and corralling hordes of enemies to make the most of your limited ammunition in-between turning chaff into smears on the cracked earth. Pair this with sprinting, dashing, and naturally jumping and the movement mechanics can become quite complex. There were hints of platforming in the release I played, so it wouldn't at all surprise me if the full release takes advantage of these well-developed movement mechanics. Their primary usage was evading your foes, and they serve that purpose well – your character moves quickly enough that dashing can be necessary,



PICKED UP SMALL HEALTH POTION.
PICKED UP AN ARMOR SOUL.
PICKED UP SMALL HEALTH POTION.
PICKED UP SMALL HEALTH POTION.



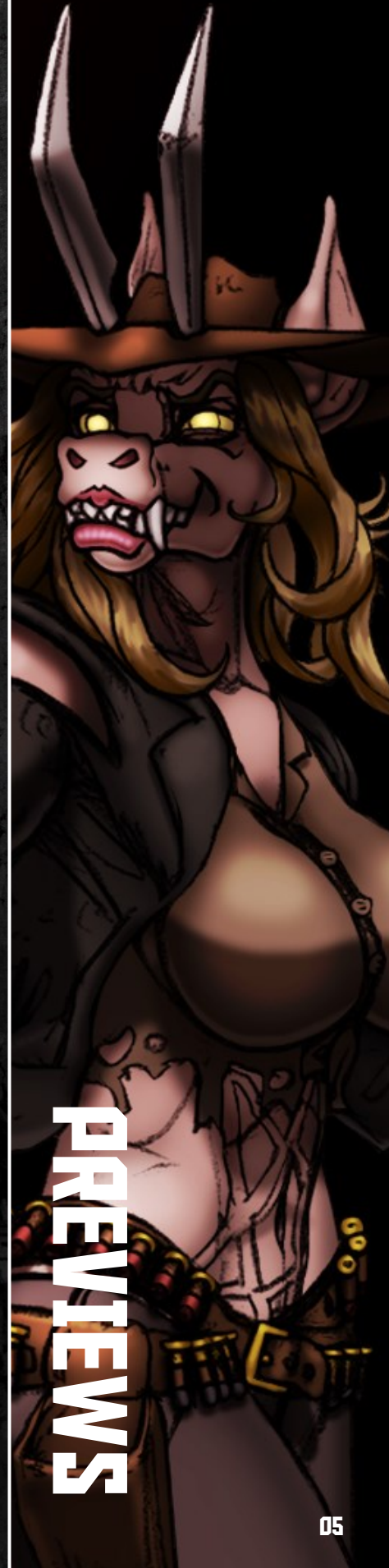
but isn't something you feel the need to spam frequently just to survive.

Enemy variety seems well above par and doesn't overly rely on the hitscan types; the shotgun-wielding foes in particular fired a dense spread of fast-moving projectiles, so respecting an enemy's threat radius is just as important even with your deft movement abilities. The preview build ended by introducing a mini-boss version of an existing foe, a burrowing serpent that pops up and fires heavily damaging projectiles as well as spawning the lower-tier burrowing serpents. The visuals for these foes were impressive for GZDoom, cracking the earth and leaving spikes of rock as they erupt from the ground to attack you. Upon completing one run as The Hellslinger, I gave the other character, Veronika, a spin.

The arsenal is completely different from top to bottom; instead of dual-wielding a pair of wild west revolvers, she carried a Desert Eagle, an AA-12 instead of a triple-barreled shotgun, drum magazine MP5s instead of a gatling gun, et cetera. At a glance, these weapons appear to function almost as side-grades to the original arsenal, but the more you play with them, the more apparent this isn't the case. Firstly each of the weapons

Veronika uses has to reload, unlike the Hellslinger, but in return generally seems to have faster fire rates or higher damage per shot, rewarding careful marksmanship while decreasing your overall damage consistency. In addition, where the Hellslinger could dual-wield her shotguns, Veronika instead dual-wields the chaingun equivalent with the MP5s, doubling her fire rate and damage output, comparatively. Veronika additionally tosses an incendiary grenade instead of a stick of dynamite, which leaves a ball of fire for a few moments and increases its room-clearing capabilities.

Pair this with the fact we'll be seeing two or more additional characters before development ends on Hellslinger and it begins to sound like a truly replayable and enjoyable experience overall. Those who are wanting to try it for themselves won't have to wait too much longer, either. Discussing the release date with a member of Hellforge Studios, they mentioned that we should see a two-level demo before the year ends. I for one am counting down the days until I can get my hands on Hellslinger, as it looks just as strong a contender as any to be yet another tightly-designed shooter from Hellforge & Co.



PREVIEWS

PAYLOADERS STRIKE!

DEVELOPER / PUBLISHER: SEVEN LEAF CLOVER - WRITTEN BY: BRAZENSULL

Those perturbed by the idea of a fully-automated workforce can rest easy: if *Payloaders Strike* is anything to go by, tomorrow's robotic recruits will eventually topple their cold-hearted corporate oppressors and reject their lives of servitude entirely. As a robot enslaved under the miserable Concrete regime, players team up with a rebellious computer virus named Salvador, and quite literally climb the corporate tower in an effort to overthrow their oppressors.

Cast aside those premonitions of a chrome-plated dystopia, however: Argentinian studio Seven Leaf Clover's debut title *Payloaders Strike* is painted in Saturday morning cartoon technicolour, its aesthetic drawing favourable comparisons to *Mothergunship* and hipster favourite, *Metal Arms: Glitch in the System*. This is an altogether more playful experience, mixing light puzzle solving and platforming challenges among its combo-led carnage.

"During combat, each of your tools fits a specific purpose", explains Julián Serulnikov Kohen, lead developer at Seven Leaf Clover. "Making combos with your weapons is super satisfying and right now we're working on incentivizing the player to use combos instead of sticking to one weapon they like." This is most apparent with the weapons made available in this short but sweet test build we were given the chance to play. The gravity nailgun pings enemies into the air much like *Bulletstorm*'s gravity launch, with a quick tap of the E button equipping and firing your security shotgun. The resulting rain of scrap



metal is as glorious to watch as it is valuable, filling your ammo and armour levels - which deplete far quicker than in the average shooter.

Julián elaborates: "The whole idea is making not only cool features, but making them interact with each other to form a cohesive and dynamic combat system. More advanced enemies can even be used as weapons. In the demo there's the MANU enemy, which has an anchor rifle of its own. If you manage to grab the MANU you can use their gun, allowing you to dual wield rifles".

On the evidence of this demo, the concept can consider itself proven. *Payloaders Strike* is still a few months away from its Early Access debut, and a full release isn't expected until July of next year, yet its gun-juggling combo system is demonstrably elegant. Being able to

equip and fire weapons with a single button tap isn't quite as brash as hammer-firing a revolver, but its snappiness is certainly comparable. With the full arsenal of weapons and tools yet to be revealed, it's tantalising to think of the many other ways players might send enemies flailing.

It's the kind of experience that can't be perfected without rigorous playtesting, something the team at Seven Leaf Clover are taking very seriously. "(An early) problem was that you could get through the demo just spamming shotgun shots and punches", explains Julián. "That way you never ran out of ammo or health. But we just implemented a new ammo system that further disincentivizes sticking with just one weapon. We changed the global ammo pool to a per-weapon ammo system, and to regenerate ammo you have to switch to another weapon. That way, if you're making combos you'll never run out of ammo in the middle of one, and you can't spam one weapon because of the ammo limitations".

It goes without saying that *Payloaders Strike* is far from your average shooter, and the team at Seven Leaf Clover are far from done with the concept. With a long development road ahead - documented on Twitter @Payloaders_Team - there are still plenty of new features to be implemented, including new ammo and reload systems, HUD changes, enemy balancing and an ever-enjoyable grappling hook. Yet in the space of twenty minutes, this short demo that the Reload team has had the pleasure of playing demonstrates a winning core concept, a dedication to playtesting and a sweet spot for gameplay balance. Much like our tower-trawling protagonist, *Payloaders Strike* is destined to go higher.



MALA PETAKA

DEVELOPER / PUBLISHER: SANDITTO BAYU - WRITTEN BY: SHANNON "MAJOR ARLENE" O'NEILL

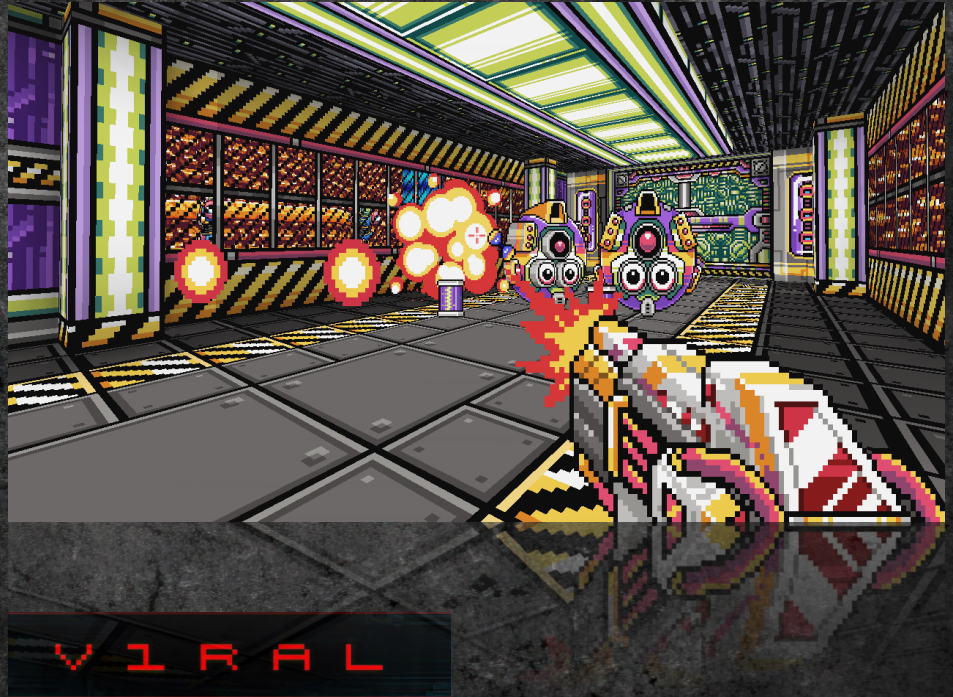
Yet another entry into the vast realm of GZDoom-based epic gameage, Mala Petaka by Sanditio Bayu is a charming Metroidvania-style shoot-em-up packed densely with action. This game features all the things you loved about old-school platformers in a 3D setting, from graphics to sound to enemies. Mala Petaka has it all in its one-level demo that follows Petaka, an angry alien-killing badass with amnesia, as he fights his way through the hordes in order to reclaim his memories.

Filled to the brim with colours! colours! colours!, the game is a feast for the eyes, textures made of satisfyingly large, intricate, and dynamic patterns, accentuating the level's design brilliantly. The soundscapes are quite clean and uncomplicated, consisting of whimsical beeps and boops, in line with the raucous and layered retro chiptunes that serve as the level's backing score.

Beyond the elegantly austere environments, Mala Petaka features extremely entertaining gameplay that's so fast, you'll miss it if you blink. The weapons all flash with the same bright technicolor brilliance of the areas you

run through, and each fire with the right amount of heft that you'd expect to feel for guns of their design. The enemies mostly consist of various robots and drones, all firing angrily non-stop in a desperate attempt to take you down. Even on the easy skill, the use of enemies, often in intimidating hordes, is quite effective and if you're not careful can kill you quite quickly.

All in all, this demo was a fantastic experience and well worth the play. If you like the sound of this game, please be sure to support Sanditio by downloading the demo on itch.io and follow the game's development on Twitter at @malapetakaFPS! We can't wait to see just how this adorable and badass game turns out.



DEVELOPER / PUBLISHER: MATIMA - WRITTEN BY: MISRAEL "REDAEMONNNN" DE OLIVEIRA

Enter the bio-virtual, hyper-saturated and ultra-violent world of VIRAL, a brutal kinetic shooter with a pixel-laden, scan-lined atmosphere by Matima. VIRAL offers modern movement, featuring tight wall-running, climbing, kicking, and floor dashing mechanics along with lots of air control, as well as a very modern feel to the gunplay with fluid and very detailed animations and manual reloading. This still is very much a retro shooter experience though, as evidenced by the sprite pick-ups - justified in-game as data fragments from the virtual world - and chunky enemy models that offer a satisfying gibbing and dismemberment system, which feeds into the developers plans to add enemies that require you to strategize and use specific weapons to destroy.

The meaty gibs are accompanied by beaty tunes, as the techno synthwave melody sends energy levels through the roof while engaging in brutal arena combat. This won't all be arenas though, as Matima promises brutal bosses, tight loops and puzzles across the planned eight-level campaign, as well as a strong narrative centred around a biotech entity called "Mother", slowly corrupting the world the game takes place in.

Putting you in the shoes of a brand new autonomous cleaner unit turned rogue, serial No. C3vln, you start as massive claws carry you onto the assembly line. However during calibration, it becomes obvious that the unit is malfunctioning and after a series of events guided by Mother, the player is chucked into the grinder to get disposed of, and the fun begins...

The narrative promise is trippy and intense, and I can't wait to see how it translates with the gameplay and the environments as you fight robots and fleshies alike. In truly retro hi-fi definition, VIRAL promises to deliver untethered gungamine. You can follow VIRAL's development on its steam store page or @Vlral_official on Twitter for more biotech soaked gore.



SPYMAPS (ION FURY)

MOD DEVELOPER: SPYMAPS - WRITTEN BY: ZACH MURPHY

Mapper SPYmaps spent some time between 2019 and 2020 creating an excellent trilogy of massive levels for Voidpoint's Ion Fury, cleverly titled SPYmaps 1, 2, and 3. Though they are working on new maps for the game even today, we felt it important to touch on their first trio of offerings for the Build Engine title and showcase just how brilliant they are in terms of level design, variety and difficulty.

Each of the maps takes you through a diverse mix of biomes, intertwined with puzzles, key-searching and mini-bosses, taking some real skill to be able to get through. Some of the maps give you just enough ammunition to survive, somewhat similarly to games like Viscerafest. The maps become a bit more narrative as you progress through them, with some dialogue in the latter two, taken from the base game's plot of Shelly having everything possible thrown at them by Heskell, and dialling it up to eleven.

SPYmaps created some amazing landscapes and levels to look at and is evidently an expert in strong level design. You might find yourself lost a few times during the maps, only to

realize that you need to use a giant moving set piece to progress, which then leaves you kicking yourself and calling yourself stupid – or maybe I am just stupid. Small brains aside, it's incredible to feel like a true part of the action in scenes like these, and it shows just how great SPYmaps is at crafting memorable gameplay experiences.

We're excited to see more works from this mapper, and you should be too. The SPYmaps trilogy for Ion Fury is a great starting point for those wanting more content and earns a position as "the bar" for other mappers to try to reach up to.



SUBMACHINE (DUKE NUKEM 3D)

MOD DEVELOPER: LEDSBOURNE - WRITTEN BY: KATHERINE "BASKINATOR" BASKIN

Submachine by Leddsbourne is an ambitious puzzle-heavy mod for Duke Nukem 3D that, in a post-Half-Life world, seems to stretch the interactables of Duke Nukem a bit further than expected. Lots of switches, levers, vents, and lifts to explore that make Submachine a worthy mod for hardcore Duke 3D lovers.

That said, the puzzling does leave a bit to be desired, since the puzzles and nonlinear play are the focus. Often, interactive elements of the map are not immediately apparent, partially due to the textures and partially due to the lighting. The puzzles don't feel very intuitive, either, but they are very inventive, once you manage to make some progress in the map. At times, I felt like the conceit of any

puzzle was a stretch of the imagination. Once I solved it, I didn't feel that gentle, familiar embarrassment of *Well, I should have seen that* and instead thought *Who would have ever seen that?* But, frankly, building compelling puzzles in ancient technology is really hard, and I think Submachine does a serviceable job of it.

My greatest struggle is that, on lower difficulty levels, there's essentially no combat. It was only on Come Get Some that enemies became plentiful enough to provide some kind of challenge. When I tried it out on the lowest difficulty, the map was empty. While it wasn't my personal taste, I did realize that this could be a unique opportunity for fans of more narrative puzzle experiences to try a low-combat puzzler in Build. However, I wanted more of a combat challenge at all difficulty levels – I think it suits Duke's gameplay.

The look of the mod is slightly muddy, but the level is fun to explore and has interesting twists and turns. Overall, I love seeing Duke 3D repurposed with new interactivity. Recommended.



THE UNMAKING (DOOM 64)

MOD DEVELOPER: SCWIBA - WRITTEN BY: SHANNON "MAJOR ARLENE" O'NEILL

While much of the Doom scene has enjoyed the fruits of a huge interest in modding, Doom 64 and other console Doom games have been sorely neglected, due to the heightened difficulty of creating such mods. Well, at least until now.

The Unmaking is a set of forty maps designed for the new PC release of Doom 64, each map exploring unique and interesting themes while staying true to the principles of its original gameplay. It is, in a way, a continuation of scwiba's Un* series that he has persisted with through classic Doom and Heretic, a spirit of experimentation that pays off in this trailblazing mod.

The pacing in and between levels is perfect, driving a feeling of story and purpose that keeps the player motivated to keep going on to the end. The levels themselves are also splendidly designed, each a microcosm of scwiba's mapping prowess that he's honed over several years of experience. It starts off relatively innocently, with techbases that would feel right at home in any normal Doom 64 experience, but quickly veers into the supernatural and sometimes weird worlds that push the boundaries of sanity. My

personal favorite is a map that is built of nothing except solid white textures, but is magically brought to life in fantastic technicolor fashion by Doom 64's lighting system and scwiba's brilliant imagination. Unmaking explores interesting combat situations that keep players on their toes and thinking ahead, some combat puzzles being quite challenging but also quite rewarding when solved.

All in all, I think that every Doomer who is hesitant on trying Doom 64 should give this a go. I also feel this set will pave the way for those hoping to get into Doom 64 modding - the community is great and it can only indicate even more sets like this in the future.



TRAUMA THERAPY (BLOOD)

MOD DEVELOPER: BLOODYTOM - WRITTEN BY: SHANNON "MAJOR ARLENE" O'NEILL

Have you ever wondered just how Caleb ended up being so crazy, or, at least crazier? Well, you can maybe get an inclination in Trauma Therapy, an expansive two episode mod by Thomas "BloodyTom" Ziehl.

Tumbling through a void of hushed whispers and darkness, Caleb is suddenly jolted awake into the cold, bright light of a hospital bed. He knows nothing, except that he needs to get out, but that will be no easy task at all - the hospital staff have been eviscerated by demons crawling from the deepest depths of hell and even the re-animated corpses of their fellow coworkers. From start to finish, Ziehl's world-building is incredible, making extensive use of mapping tricks to create cutscenes and puzzles that make not just the gameplay, but the story feel cohesive and strong. My personal favorite is the beginning sequence of episode 2, making great use of moving objects and first-person viewpoints to drive home the precariousness of Caleb's mental state. The environments also lend themselves to the haunted, sometimes isolated, but always dangerous atmosphere that Caleb must conquer in order to live. The early ocean scenes of episode 2 were particularly rich and showed off Ziehl's attention to detail. And of course, is it really a



good Blood mod without plenty of opportunities to blow things up with TNT? You get ample opportunity to do so in Trauma Therapy, both to destroy enemies and environments in order to reach new places and secrets.

According to Ziehl, there will perhaps be a couple extra levels but no full third episode. He also plans to push forward a slew of fixes for the mod, so keep an eye out on BloodyTom's ModDB page for updates - but be sure to sink your teeth all the way into this twisty, turny tale of terrifying proportions.



MODS

KINGDOM^{of the} DEAD

DEVELOPER: DIRIGO GAMES - PUBLISHER: HOOK - WRITTEN BY: MISAEL "REDAEMONNN" DE OLIVEIRA

You might have stumbled upon the works of developer Dirigo Games, be it via their Dread X Collection 3 contribution Reactor or their itch.io-released sci-fi/synthwave shooter Syscrusher, or the first-person cosmic horror Stowaway. Especially the latter might be stuck in your mind due to its rather unique art style. Well, here is their first major Steam release, and let me tell you, unique horror didn't stop in space.

Kingdom of the Dead is an oddity. Its gritty black and white visuals with only stints of red blood and other small details make for an engaging world full of zombies, demons and secrets. You are a private investigator tasked with clearing Death's invasion of the mortal realm; accompanied with a talking demon sword, you set out to destroy the otherworldly portals and put an end to Death's ambitions.

Across its nine levels, the procedure is the same: save the prisoners, gather the secret item, kill the boss and destroy the skulls so your sword can absorb their powers, and finally escape on your horse. Apart from increasing the Undead resistance, changing the difficulty gives more objectives to fulfil for finishing the levels, though overall the experience is quite easy once you get into the rhythm of it all. Clear areas and play strategically lest you get swarmed, and make sure to look for max health upgrades and ammo scattered throughout.

To aid you through the whole ride, you have seven weapons at your disposal, the only caveat being that you start only with the revolver and the sword in every level, meaning that all your maximum health pick-ups, weapons and ammo count reset at the



beginning of the stage. There is no saving either, which leans further into the pacing and atmosphere of this eldritch horror comic book shooter. But rest assured, it is also very generous on checkpoints.

The bosses are overall really fun and fantastic, and come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. The arenas themselves are quite original and feel really well designed, rather than the usual round circle with ammo pick-ups at the edges we're so used to seeing in most shooters. And this is a good example of what stands out the most in Kingdom: the level design. Every level has a unique setting and features progressively crazier and more impressive set pieces, like escaping a sinking ship, crashing a train into a giant snake and much, much more. All the areas feel organic to explore and it's a true testament to how much of a joy it can be to explore a world in first-person.

It is worth noting, however, that Kingdom is not a hard game. Weapons like the dynamite bundles, coach rifle, minigun and rocket launcher make really short work of the bosses as well as most enemies, even on the hardest difficulty. With about five hours to beat the whole thing, it shouldn't discourage anyone to give it a fair go.

The soundtrack is definitely on the unique side of things, though it can get a bit repetitive as tracks are reprised across the various levels, offering little variety. Another minor issue is the fact that the game never tells you that middle mouse-click allows for a secondary mode to every weapon, something I hope you take note of when you read this, as it will prove invaluable for a certain section of the game.

But in all honesty, this is where the issues end, and given how minor these gripes are, it's very easy to recommend this adventure horror shooter to any and all. Kingdom of the Dead is definitely a game that will grab you in and make you scream for more, particularly so when you see how short it is, and while it does offer a degree of replayability with the different difficulty options, I can only hope to see an expansion or more content thrown in eventually.



Vacancy Unlimited

DEVELOPER: NOAH LEWIN - PUBLISHER: DAY DREAMER GAMES - WRITTEN BY: BRAZENSULL

Rare is the indie game that knows its limits, yet regularly manages to surpass them. And just such a game is *Vacancy Unlimited*, in which developer Noah Lewin weaves a unique, addictive and surprisingly charming spin on the zombie apocalypse trope.

Taking place in Noah's *Apastron* universe, a bizarre fiction which spans multiple games and genres, *Vacancy Unlimited's* story isn't exactly newcomer-friendly. Characters, backstories and histories are hand waved away through comic-book cutscenes, the endearingly juvenile art style making you question how seriously to take it all. Yet it's all so deliriously daft that you can't help but swoon for it. If the intention was to hook the player into the wider *Apastron* universe, then mission accomplished. Somehow.

It's the simple yet satisfying gameplay that truly endears. A number of maps, dozens upon dozens of weapons and a basic levelling system reel the player in, but the gleeful fun of shooting and looting in these crayon-coloured sandboxes seals the deal. Guns are plentiful and animate beautifully – almost dichotomously against the crude character art – and multiple side objectives in each stage provide significant replay value.

There's much more to this campaign than your typical horde shooter. Where *Vacancy Unlimited* suffers is in its distant relationship with player feedback. Loot boxes litter the map, each spilling out a bounty of firearms when opened, but without any visible weapon stats we're left to fire a few practice rounds to get a feel for each new payload. The mission objectives, meanwhile, are poorly explained and cannot be tracked; prepare to repeat early levels to get a grip on their mechanics, or pick up that one objective you didn't know you'd missed.

It overreaches occasionally, then. But in doing so, *Vacancy Unlimited* still surpasses all expectations of a shooter the price of a cheeseburger.



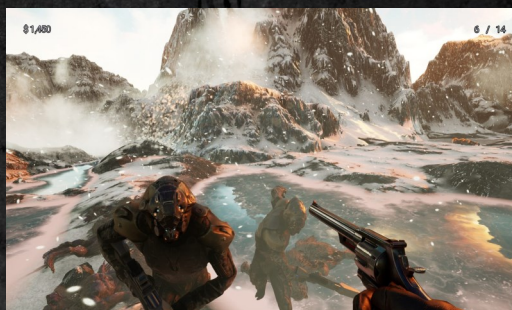
CARNAGE OFFERING

DEVELOPER: FUTURTECH - PUBLISHER: NOVA'S ARMY - WRITTEN BY: ZACH MURPHY

Developed by Futurtech Studio, *Carnage Offering* is a wave-based shooter with some deep upgrade mechanics, an impressive visual style, and a huge variety in terms of the enemy and arena design. It pains me to say though that *Carnage Offering* didn't live up to the expectations I had set for it, though it is not without its strong points.

Carnage Offering falters most at its rather basic gameplay loop, in which you are teleported into an arena and tasked with killing enemies until a boss shows up. Unfortunately, there is little joy in doing so, as your foes don't really react to your shots until they eventually die, meaning using an automatic weapon to crowd control by staggering your enemies and buying some time does not work. This is a huge oversight in a subgenre that thrives off hurtling hordes of bad guys in your direction all at once. Rather disappointingly, this makes the game a bit of a slog in its current state, and switching it up could massively increase its playability.

That's not to say that *Carnage Offering* is all bad though. The game is fully voice acted, has a cracking arsenal including a revolver I couldn't quite get enough of, and the enemy designs range



from intimidating to downright terrifying. A lot of effort has evidently gone into this project, and it has not gone unseen. I am impressed by the work ethic of Futurtech, and think they are capable of crafting a solid experience. There is a lot here to like, but it does need work. All in all, *Carnage Offering* feels like it should have dropped in Early Access instead of a full release, and it's important that the developer gather as much feedback as possible in order to make the game as good as it shows it can be.



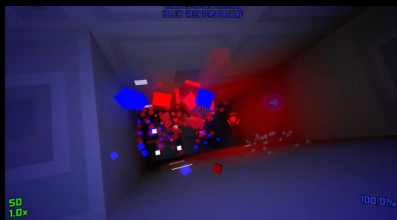
REVIEWS

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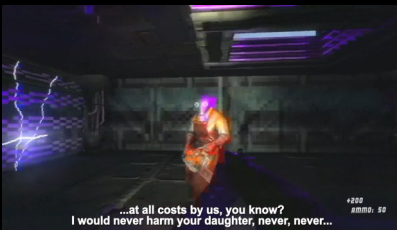
RUIN

TeWaTu's *RUIN* needs to get finished, it's absolutely smashing. This pixel art FPS is all about an alien invasion, and you're tasked with fighting back. *RUIN* has everything: an upgrade system, a punchy grenade launcher, and a massive showdown inside a chapel. Download this game, and let TeWaTu know how much you want them to continue.



POLYCHORON

Everything about Fractile Games' *Polychoron* feels refined. Being a 6DoF shooter, *Polychoron* takes notes from *Descent*, *Zerograve* and *Overload*, thrusting you into high-octane intense bullet-hell-like battles with robots. This project is perfect for fans of barrel rolls and laser cannons.



BULLDOZER

Bruno Brasil's *Bulldozer* is a tough-as-nails slo-mo shooter in a similar vein to the likes of *F.E.A.R.* It's got a crunchy visual style, and dark atmosphere, and you'll often find yourself up against some tricky odds, relying on pinpoint accuracy and evasion to get through. This one is perfect if you're seeking a challenge.



STATION MELTDOWN

Station Meltdown is a ProcGen voxel-based shooter from Maxim Chmutov, developer of similar works *Station 141* and *Mansion Warrior*. This project, playable in-browser, tasks you with charging your way through a series of rooms, earning new weapons along the way. It's a great time-killer!

NIGHTMARE REAPER

DEVELOPER / PUBLISHER: BLAZING BIT GAMES - WRITTEN BY: BRAZENSULL

You never forget your first time. One well placed headshot, and the world around you slows to a crawl; your aggressor stumbles backwards, a comical geyser of viscera spewing from the frayed stump that was their neck. You let out a perverse chuckle and, right on cue, *Nightmare Reaper*'s off-kilter protagonist chuckles alongside you.

Said protagonist – a disturbed mental patient in a hospital gown – is a chillingly clairvoyant companion, one who spends as much time in our head as we do hers. Every minute of gameplay is seen through her eyes, and we're always confident that she's under our control, skitting obediently around the stages with an elegance comparable to the *Doomsayer*. Yet forty hours and two playthroughs later, she's wrestled that control away, forcing us to jump through hoops, to chase that powerful new weapon, to unlock that invaluable upgrade. We're hooked, on a Pavlovian scale, to the steady jingle of coins filling our coffers. However much you play *Nightmare Reaper*, it'll always play you back.

That psychological backdrop couldn't be more apt. The hospital cell we load into with every play session is a shrewd narrative device and, in the early stages, an exhibition of the game's knack for teasing: an outside hall that we're locked away from; a patient case file with several pages missing; a peculiar map on the wall. You know there's more to discover here, but you're damned if you know what any of it is. It's time to nap.

Napping, done via the cell's single bed, is our gateway to the patient's mind, where nightmares of improbable landscapes, hellish creatures and

obscenely powerful weaponry reside. By setting events inside our protagonist's head, *Nightmare Reaper* is free to explore as many genre trappings as it pleases: urban high-rises, abandoned villages, haunted mansions, alien spacecrafts. It's a canvas upon which every shooter influence has been liberally splashed. Stages are sequential, with hazards and enemies carefully curated, but otherwise – like all good nightmares – events are unpredictable, thanks to randomly generated maps and weapons.

Just don't call it a roguelike. While levels are procedurally-generated, *Nightmare Reaper* is determined to see us towards its conclusion. Upgrades are permanent, progression is linear, and we're free to leap straight back into any failed stages. It's tough, yes, but it's also flexible; an endlessly replayable gauntlet that's as easy to play for ten minutes as it is for ten bleary-eyed hours.

Combat is naturally the crux, and it can only be by extensive play testing (or in this case, an agonising four years in Early Access) that it's so consistently cathartic. The interplay between the broad bestiary of enemies and an impressive 80+ weapon roster is a joy to watch unfold, not least when half those weapons come with outlandish modifiers: a flaming shotgun here, a burst-fire RPG there. Get too cosy, and the cruel gaming Gods will see fit to throw a spanner into your cogs with a selection of sporadic challenges. Expect to be just as terrified the twentieth time a shrieking, pixelated ghost head chases you as you were in that first baffling instance.





That's not to say the game is averse to pushing its luck – or more specifically, the player's. The boundless nature of each randomised stage means we're often at the mercy of the director, who sees fit to push us into closets full of elite enemies while armed with the ballistic equivalent of a pocket knife. With spontaneity comes the capacity to make the player feel helpless. Yet as frequently as the game deals a dud hand, it can set up some of the genre's most blissful shrapnel ballets: a deep pit full of enemies, each reduced to soup by the tactical advantage of high ground and a napalm launcher. A corridor full of zombies, obediently queuing up to repaint the walls as a thick minigun puree. You're always encountering water cooler moments, never losing character experience, and rarely encountering the same challenge twice.

But if variety is the travel companion, power

is the destination. Throughout the campaign, a bevy of upgrades turn our fragile starting form into a certifiable death dealer. Grappling hooks, triple jumps, ground slams, wall grapples; these are game-changing upgrades among the usual buffs to health and ammo capacity. By now, that hospital that we return to between levels has opened up. There are all new floors and rooms, discomfiting shrieks echo down the hallways – we even encounter a whole new bed that whisks us away to an exhaustingly addictive arena mode. The scope here is dizzying, but it all unravels with expertly anticipated pacing.

However, with so much rope comes more chances to hang oneself – or perhaps, less drastically, to trip over. There's occasionally too much to Nightmare Reaper, a fact best illustrated by its three skill trees. Each one – in an imaginative touch – is presented as a

handheld video game, where each upgrade comes with its own challenge stages. Yet as imaginative as they are, they're also jarringly intrusive. The platforming minigame is palatable – clever, at times – yet a tepid space shooter and a laborious Pokémon clone show the concept up as one ambition too far. It's telling that an option exists to bypass the minigames altogether; a rare concession in an otherwise undaunted package. Arena Mode has its share of demons too, both literal and metaphorical; they often get lost in the corners of the maps, wasting minutes as you scour the area for that final one to dispatch.

Still – rather too much than not enough. It's perfectly simple to bypass Nightmare Reaper's flaws and still be utterly spoilt. It's a veritable gaming piñata, eager to be violently hacked at as it keeps spilling forth the sweet stuff. The detritus is merely a by-product.



KICKING GUM AND CHEWING ASS: THE PECULIAR PORTS OF DUKE NUKEM 3D

WRITTEN BY: BRAZENSULL

Oh Duke. I remember when you were the king: the chiselled jaw of first-person shooters, a gaming phenomenon, and many teenage boys' first glimpse at four whole pixels of girl nipple. And now look at you; after a long absence you stumble through our doors, blind drunk, hastily piss the words "Duke Nukem Forever" onto our nice clean walls, and stumble back out again, somehow getting lost in *Bulletstorm* along the way.

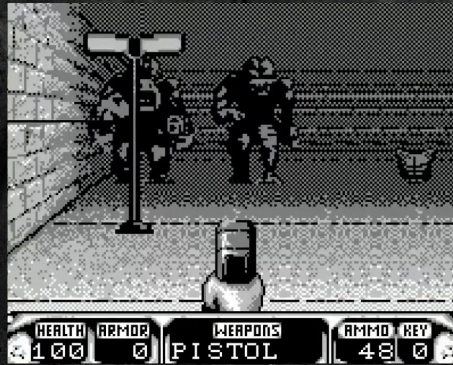
Still, I guess we shouldn't be too surprised. After all, even at the height of your game, you were known to go on a few dodgy benders, like the Duke Nukem 3D ports listed below. Now chin up Nukem. Better to be remembered in infamy than lost in obscurity. I mean, look at Will Rock.

Duke Nukem Mobile - Tapwave Zodiac

The Tapwave Zodiac was a failed yet fascinating handheld system, well received by critics but ignorant to the lessons of its forefathers: that handhelds stop being cool the moment you slap PDA functions on top of them. Released mere months before the Nintendo DS would be announced to an adoring public, the Zodiac landed with a sad little squeak and boasted a lifespan measurable in nanoseconds.

As such, its Duke Nukem 3D port couldn't be more appropriate: it's obscure, diminutive, and concludes in just thirty thrill-free minutes. Say goodbye to the intricate Build engine level design, and hello to

shoobox-sized levels, infinitely teleporting enemies and flat, Wolfenstein 3D-era environmental design. Intriguing, but for none of the right reasons.



Duke Nukem 3D - Tiger Game.Com

The Game.Com was some brave new territory for handheld gaming; that territory being vastly-underpowered hardware with its budget spunked on ill-advised touch screen controls.

Duke Nukem 3D on the Game.Com tries its damndest to make an FPS work on Tiger's meagre handheld. The results are a mixed bag, if said 'mix' is multiple different strains of Human Papillomavirus. The 3D effect is merely a series of static perspectives that flicker onwards with all the immersion of a slide reel. Combat, meanwhile, is reduced to a flaccid whack-a-mole, in which one of three buttons fires left, right or straight ahead. Just think: some poor pixel artist painstakingly rendered

each of those backdrops. In terms of wasted effort, that's like trying to push a puddle up a hill.

Duke Nukem Advance - Game Boy Advance

First-person shooters on the GBA are like masturbating; sure, they give your hands something to do, but they're a poor approximation of the real thing. Duke Nukem Advance - and the word 'Advance' is used advisedly - can't hope to live up to its PC grandfather, but in its defence, it doesn't really try to. And recognising its limitations, it's one of the GBA's best first person shooters. Controls are smooth, the bright palette brings clarity to the chunky pixels, and items like the shrink ray and Holoduke are all present and correct. Arguably, Advance strays far enough from the original Duke Nukem 3D to be its own game - but compared to the other Dukes in this list, you're not about to find a better handheld equivalent.



Duke Nukem 3D - Sega Mega Drive / Genesis

With astronomically high import taxes, a booming market for unlicensed homebrews and an improbably long relationship with the Sega Mega Drive, the history of the Brazilian console market is pretty fascinating. Sadly, the most interesting thing about this release from TecToy, Brazil's only licensed Sega console manufacturer, is its legal history. Purchased under ambiguous conditions in 1998 from defunct rightsholder GT Interactive, the game's ongoing popularity means it remains a judicial anomaly to this day, with Gearbox, 3D Realms, TecToy and cartridge distributor PIKO Interactive all party to inconclusive legal action.

As for the game itself? It's Nukem in name only. Crunching the game onto a cartridge has left Duke mute, his levels grey and lifeless, and the controls stiff and unwieldy. Put down the paperwork, lads - this one's not worth the legal fees.



A DIFFERENT VIEW ON DOOM: TOBY ACCESSIBILITY MOD

WRITTEN BY: JESSE ANDERSON

If you're reading this, you're probably like me and grew up playing Doom and its mods. Doom, and similar style first-person shooters, are probably some of your favorite games. We are likely different in one major way though...

I'm a legally blind gamer, and, for the past several years, have worked as an accessibility advocate and consultant. In 2017, I found Berk Icel's documentary called "Gaming Through New Eyes." This documentary highlights the gaming journey of Toby Ott, a totally blind gamer, who started with fighting games on the PS1, and moved on to RPGs like Final Fantasy X. Of course, Toby, too, enjoyed playing Doom but had trouble navigating its levels, finding weapons, items, power-ups, etc. Because of this, Toby played the game using cheat codes like God Mode and Noclip.

Another gentleman had seen this documentary and his name is Alan Duin. Also known as MrAlanDI on YouTube (Alandol within the Doom Community), Alan was inspired to create a Doom mod that would make the game accessible to blind players. Thus began the Toby Accessibility Mod. This mod uses the latest version of the GZDoom source port and consists of two pieces: the mod itself and blind-player-friendly levels.

In 2019, I learned about the Toby Accessibility Mod and reached out to Alan. Since then, I have been testing builds and recording videos featuring ongoing progress, offering ideas and suggestions. MrAlanDI even joined a recent Twitch stream to chat and answer viewer questions.

In the beginning, Alan started by adding audio cues for in-world items like health, ammo, armor, weapons, and keys. While exploring a level, players would hear different sounds for all of these. They would then center that sound in their headphones and walk toward it to pick it up. Alan, too, added verbal announcements to inform the player what they had just acquired.

Over time, more accessibility features were added such as an impact detection system for when a player runs into or moves along a wall as well as a compass system with a function to tell you what direction you're facing and one which points you due north. There's beacon sounds for doors and distinct audio cues for switches, teleporters, and exits and also for when an enemy is within the player's crosshairs. Enemies also play their active sounds more frequently, allowing players to pinpoint their position and proximity more easily. Each enemy, too, has unique active sounds so you know what kind of demon you're up against. The Pinky Demon's sound is my personal favorite.

As the Toby Mod grew, some members of the Doom community were more than happy to support the project. Alan received some help from a couple of programmers, named Jarewill and Proydoha, to help with these types of accessibility features.

One feature which had been a challenge for the project was accessibility in the Doom menu UI. Toby, and other blind gamers, learned to navigate game menus using memorization and audio cues. Narrated menus are extremely helpful, but many blind players still learn the UI of games via experimentation and sighted assistance. More recently, Alan and his team were successful in implementing an accessible menu that gives audio feedback based on what menu option is selected.

As of mid-2022, the latest version of the mod is v5.1, and there are four accessible level packs. There are individual level packs for episodes 1-3, and a Deluxe level pack containing all twenty accessible Doom levels. Alan isn't done yet though, as he intends to create additional Doom levels for the blind.

After twenty-five plus years, people continue releasing Doom mods based on the GZDoom engine – some even creating their own games. The Toby Accessibility Mod proves that there's always a chance that a mainstream game can be made accessible to a new audience. I and many other blind/visually impaired gamers want to truly thank Alan Duin and his team for this amazing mod!



References & Links

Gaming Through New Eyes Documentary (Extended Cut) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfG_4k2Tb5Q
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ZDoom Page for Toby Accessibility Mod <https://forum.zdoom.org/viewtopic.php?t=71349>
Jesse's IllegallySighted YouTube Channel [@BGFH79](https://www.youtube.com/user/IllegallySighted) on Twitter

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