VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

EVILDOERS ARE EASIER AND THEY TASTE BETTER…

The first-person RPG is a curious beast. While some firms seem to be able to get the genre splicing absolutely right, others can fall horribly short of the mark. It's a lot to do with the way in which the two (or more, in the case of the more ambitious or foolhardy developer) styles are joined. All too often we see companies simply vying for two different markets with a product that would ordinarily be overlooked in both. Thankfully, not all development houses are out to make a cheap buck by pimping any old nonsense in as many circles as possible. New kid Troika has made a respectable start but is still looking for that one high-profile title that could make it a household name. Don't get us wrong, we're not going to cast aside all reservations and proclaim *Bloodlines* to be a ticket to stardom, but if nothing else it's a damn good start.

As you may already know, the wonderful visuals you see before you come courtesy of Mr Gordon Freeman – *Half-Life 2*'s central programming is given a vastly different assignment outside of the long-awaited sequel. It's not purely cosmetic either and the impressive physics that the Valve tech demos have been so keen to highlight are in full effect here. The gritty LA cityscape provides an impressive amount of freedom, from exploring buildings and slums to venturing down into the sewers and beyond, and if early impressions are anything to go by, the claims being made as to the level of non-linearity in the game could very well be true.

Being an RPG rather than an out-and-out shooter, your initial choice of clan has a much greater impact on the game that it may first seem. In addition to unique skills and attributes for each available group, your character will determine how you'll need to play the game. Obviously, for some the game will be a more gung-ho experience, but with options for stealth, trickery, disguise and diplomacy all a possibility depending on your chosen form, the game experience can vary greatly from player to player. Much like *Deus Ex*, problem solving is tackled similarly and regardless of skills or race there are often many ways to reach your ultimate goal. Such opportunity for individual play is obviously one of the trump cards in Troika's hand and so long as it plays it well it should work wonders in the game's favour.

It's still a fair way off, but even so *Bloodlines* already has a lot going for it. Few can call into question the technology that Valve has slaved over and combined with the number-crunching minds of the little-known RPG development wizards. This could well be one of the dark horses of next year before you even take into account the enormous potential of the announced online multiplayer options. The PC will have more than its fair share of shooters as we move into 2004 so it's always pleasing to see titles like this, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Thief 3* pushing the genre in new directions. Without such innovation, this increasingly popular style of game (outside of Japan, at least) would be in a very different state today…

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

You know an engine is destined for great things when firms are fighting over it before the game it was designed for is even released. Such is the case with *Half-Life 2*. The Source technology that powers physics and AI in the Valve title is already hot property, and it's not hard to see why. On top of the obvious benefits, Troika's use of this core system has numerous little-known advantages. For one, the technology allows for dynamic lip-sync – a major plus for such a dialogue-heavy game. We're only guessing here, but big money says *Bloodlines* won't be the last title to make the most of Valve's hard work.
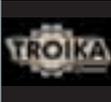
"WITH STEALTH, TRICKERY AND DIPLOMATIC OPTIONS ALL A POSSIBILITY DEPENDING ON YOUR CHOSEN FORM, THE GAME CAN VARY GREATLY FROM PLAYER TO PLAYER"

■ For some clans, stealth is all-important. Luckily, this guy isn't part of one of these clans…
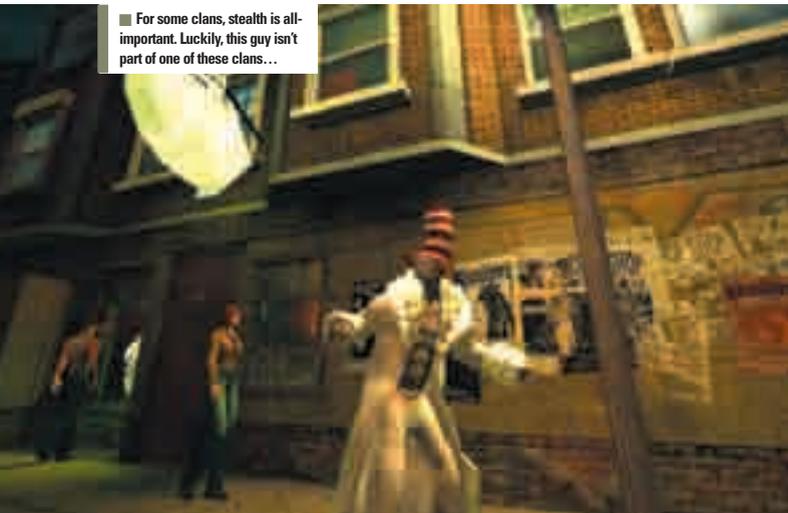
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COMPANY PROFILE

■ Founded in 1998 by the creators of popular RPG franchise *Fallout*, Troika Games specialises in role-playing games and is converting many tabletop favourites into digital form. A relative newcomer to the development scene, this could be one firm for the stat-happy to keep an eye on…

HISTORY

■ VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE: TEMPLE OF ELEMENTAL EVIL 2003 (PC)
■ ARCANUM 2001 (PC)

■ Never let it be said that the undead aren't snappy dressers…

■ Expect plenty more dark and gothic settings like this to be littered around the finished game.

"BLOODLINES ALLOWS PLAYERS TO EXPLORE A SOPHISTICATED CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM IN AN OPEN, NON-LINEAR REALM"

LARRY GOLDBERG, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, ACTIVISION WORLDWIDE STUDIOS

VIDEOGAMES MATHS
GETTING TO THE HEART OF BLOODLINES

SYSTEM SHOCK x HALF-LIFE 2 + BLOOD OMEN = V: TM – BLOODLINES

■ Ick. And you thought the regular vampires were pretty sinister…