

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

■ £34.99 | Pub: Activision | Dev: Troika Games | ETA: Out Now
www.vampirebloodlines.com

REQUIRES PIII 1.2GHz, 384MB RAM and a DirectX 9.0c-compatible 64MB 3D card
DESIRES P4 2GHz, 512MB RAM and a 128MB 3D card

Martin Korda gets sucked in by a vampiric beauty



04:19:65



Side-quests are many and varied. Here you have to stop zombies from escaping into the city.

I'LL ADMIT IT, I was suspicious. You see, usually when I get to review a game that's already on sale, it's because the publisher has realised its product is about as entertaining as a depressed clown who's trying to gas himself to death in an oven. But in *Bloodlines*, we have an exception. A major exception.

INPERSPECTIVE

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

Reviewed Issue 137, Score 94%
 Featuring turn-based rather than real-time combat, this is one of the best RPGs ever created.

DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR

Reviewed Issue 137, Score 86%
 Not as good as we hoped, but still a great game with many similarities to *Bloodlines*. If you prefer sci-fi, then opt for this instead.

As I'm sure you know by now, *Bloodlines* uses the same engine as *Half-Life 2*. But to linger on this subject for too long would be to do this freeform macabre RPG a gross disservice, as it possesses more than enough merits of its own. So let's get this part out of the way so we can sink our fangs into the meat of what is, for the most part, a superbly crafted yarn of underworld subterfuge and conspiracy woven into the fabric of a living, yet often unsettling world.

While *Bloodlines* is nowhere near as graphically impressive as *HL2*, it still proves an ocular delight, perfectly portraying the sinister LA streets in which the game is set, while characters display a fairly convincing array of facial expressions. However, the less said about the game's

poor physics system the better, with objects often lacking both weight and substance.

CREATING A MONSTER

Bloodlines begins, as you'd well expect, with a detailed character creation process based on the White Wolf rule set (www.white-wolf.com). If you're an RPG veteran, you can jump straight in and start configuring your character, choosing from seven different vampire clans (all with different looks, strengths and weaknesses) and tweaking a host of stats, skills and disciplines (see 'Overview Of A Vampire', right).

Any newbies amongst you can relax too, as you're admirably catered for by a set of zany questions that will identify your ideal clan,

"A superbly crafted yarn of underworld subterfuge woven into the fabric of a living, unsettling world"

OVERVIEW OF A VAMPIRE

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT BATS AND SUCKING BLOOD WHEN YOU RISE UP FROM THE GRAVE

You can master many disciplines in *Bloodlines*, many of which are dependent on your clan. Each one proffers great powers for a limited time, which increase as you level up. The downside is that every time you activate a discipline it drains your blood supply. Here's just a taster of some of the disciplines you can master, young bloodsucker.



CELERITY

Need some speed? Then *Bloodlines'* version of bullet-time is just the thing, slowing down the world around you and giving you more time to plan your next attack... or escape route.



POTENCE

Bargaining not your thing? Well, here's your answer. Activate this and you'll receive a massive strength bonus to help you tear your enemies a new blood donor hole.



PRESENCE

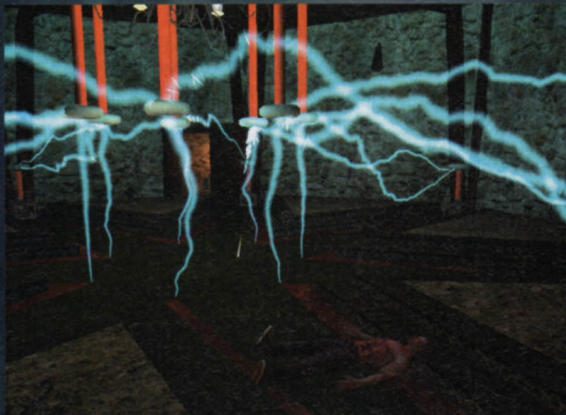
If you're a bit of a pretty boy (or girl) and don't want to mess up your hair in fight, then this discipline will make you harder. That way you can stay looking like a complete nonce.



BLOOD BUFF

If you're struggling to pick a lock or just need to boost your strength, dexterity and stamina, then Blood Buff is the quick fix solution to solve all your problems.

"Don't try and stop me - I'm going back in for Mr Snuffles."



"I'm really glad he went first."

depending on how you answer, before you're whisked off to the intuitive character creation screen. Just remember though, with every single skill and attribute affecting how you play the game and how NPCs react to you, it's important that you choose carefully.

Once you've made your choices, you're thrown straight into the world of vampires, and before you know it you're embroiled in the machinations

of the undead, slowly unravelling a plot with more twists than a 1980s perm. Gradually you sink deeper into the game's clutches as you interact with its believable, finely crafted characters that brim with charisma and individuality, and embark on a seemingly never-ending stream of quests and sub-quests that are offered to you at every turn.

Every major character you meet has a back-story bubbling

intriguingly in a world that spills over with sinister happenings and unsavoury individuals. The dusky LA locales brim with detail, genuine humour and masterful pastiche (just listen to the radio shows and you'll see what I mean), and it's all too easy to let yourself be seduced by the world around you, ignoring the crux of the plot and simply milking *Bloodlines* for every drop of immersion you can suck from its bountiful veins.

I LIKE 'EM BIG

The abundance of open-ended and varied missions mean you'll rarely, if ever, feel bored. One minute you'll be searching a haunted house, head crawling like a lice-ridden scalp as the sublime soundtrack and effects chill you to the marrow, the next you're hunting down a victim in a sleazy lap-dancing parlour while a rock track keeps time with your rushing heart.

Dialogue is another of the game's major features, with thousands of conversation

topics and a myriad of responses provided when speaking with NPCs. But quantity doesn't assure quality, and while the dialogue is well written, all too often your replies seem fairly insignificant to a conversation's outcome. What's more, it's also usually pretty obvious which reply is your best bet.

To some extent, this problem is tempered by your skills and abilities. Confused? Allow me to explain. If you're a good-looking vamp with a silk-lined tongue and bags of charisma, then your dialogue choices will occasionally be bolstered by sweet-talking sentiments that'll help you get your way. If on the other hand, you're a bit of a brute, then you'll be able to issue threats instead. Simple.

The same attribute-based principals apply to how you can approach missions. Let's

say, for example, you have to infiltrate a rival clan's base. You could sneak your way in, adeptly opening locks with picks and using your hacking skills to break into computer systems, disabling them as you go. Or, if your physical stats are up to it, you could simply head in with a shotgun and mow your way through the level, picking up keys and access cards from the still twitching corpses lying at your feet. Can't make your mind up? Then compromise, and do both. It's completely up to you.

It's this kind of freedom that propels *Bloodlines* into the same bracket as *Deus Ex*, *Knights Of The Old Republic* and



Don't cry love, it's not as bad as it looks.



You like that, huh?



Bloodlines takes full advantage of its 18 rating.

Morrowind, and ensures that it never feels like a linear, predictable experience.

The LA streets aren't quite up to the same standards, though. Citizens generally mill around aimlessly, often standing around in alleyways waiting for you to suck their blood (which feeds your powers and bolsters your health), while police don't even flinch when you walk up to them with a shotgun and call them crackling. But get caught committing a Masquerade Violation (the code followed by vampires so that humans don't realise they're sharing the streets with the undead), or commit a crime, and they'll hunt you down, scouring the streets and back alleys en masse as

you desperately hide in the shadows. In fact, the AI is generally pretty passable, though it never rivals the quality of *Half-Life 2*.

THING IS...

With time running out and with *Bloodlines* clearly threatening a Classic rating, it pains me to have to pull out a bag of negatives, especially as it's entranced me more than almost any other game I've played this year. But I'm a professional (layabout) and if there are criticisms to be levelled, then level I must.

First off, combat. While the first-person shooter sections are entertaining and challenging (accuracy and damage are based on your

skills), the third-person melee combat sections are infuriatingly clumsy – a problem that's magnified by the game's unresponsive controls.

These combat sections feel more like a cheap console beat 'em up than a quality PC RPG, while the balance between the damage inflicted by melee weapons and guns is incredibly skewed.

Graphical and sound glitches also

abound, with lip synching sometimes jerking out of time like a B-movie martial arts flick, thrown objects (like metal bins) making virtually no sound at all, and some clipping problems causing limbs to protrude through walls. You're also forced to endure fairly long loading times every time you

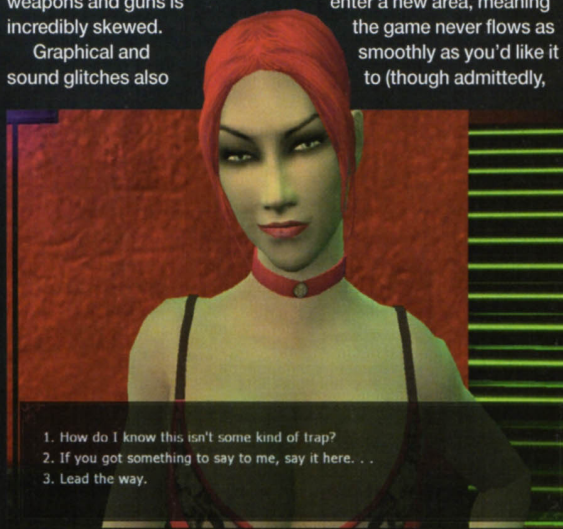
enter a new area, meaning the game never flows as smoothly as you'd like it to (though admittedly,



You'll try anything to recapture the magic.



Never buy a dog from *Exchange & Mart*.



1. How do I know this isn't some kind of trap?
2. If you got something to say to me, say it here. . .
3. Lead the way.

Characters have convincing facial expressions.



The third-person melee combat is a pretty clumsy ordeal.



SECOND OPINION

WILL PORTER

Despite the fact that I'm thoroughly enjoying my Vampiric sortie, I have a list of issues with *Bloodlines* as long as my cold, undead arm. Most of them stem from the fact that the game never quite feels at home as either a shooter or an RPG, and so sometimes presents itself as an unobtrusive mix of the two.

Whereas *Deus Ex* nailed this distinction, *Bloodlines*' almost comedic third-person combat really seems to put the stats and abilities off-kilter, and the dialogue (although snappy) never convinces you that you're having much effect on the world around you, as it does in a game like *KOTOR*.

More importantly though, the game is plagued by irritating bugs that simply should not have made it as far as retail. Martin can see the goodness through the glitches, and so can I, but all too often the game feels unpolished and, once or twice, nigh-on unfinished.

this is more of a niggle than a major problem).

Despite its shortcomings and glitches (the latter will hopefully soon be rectified by a patch), *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* is still a beautifully chilling and captivating creation, an RPG that's earned the right to be mentioned in the same breath as the best, though sadly not as the best. It may not be perfect, but once it gets hold of you, it'll suck your spare time dry and enslave your attention, making you its loyal subject till the end credits roll. Go on take a bite – I think you'll really enjoy it. **[C]**

PCZONE VERDICT

- ✓ Deep, immersive and disturbing
- ✓ Varied and entertaining quests and sub-quests
- ✓ Brilliant storyline with excellent moments of humour
- ✓ Genuinely freeform in nature
- ✗ Poor melee combat and unbalanced weapons
- ✗ An annoying amount of graphical and sound glitches
- ✗ Dialogue choices often arbitrary

86

Pretty Bloody Good

MISSED OPPORTUNITY



"I only came in to get my parking permit!"

PUTTING THE BAT BACK INTO COMBAT

Why has no-one managed to get real-time combat right in an RPG since *Deus Ex*? *Bloodlines* would have been even better had Troika taken the time to design a decent melee combat system, such as that employed in *Escape From Butcher Bay* (see p62), and used the Source engine to augment the AI's capabilities.