

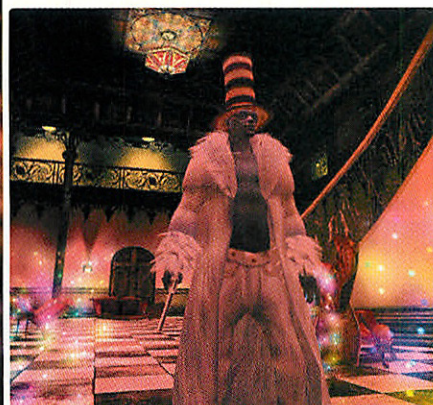
PUBLISHER: Activision **DEVELOPER:** Troika Games **GENRE:** RPG **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 1.2GHz, 384MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 3.3GB install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2.0GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** None

Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines

An RPG you can really sink your teeth into



It may not feature the snazziest spell effects in gaming, but *Bloodlines'* spells are remarkably effective in dealing with the game world.



If only the NPCs in the game exhibited the same visual flair as this player character Malkavian....

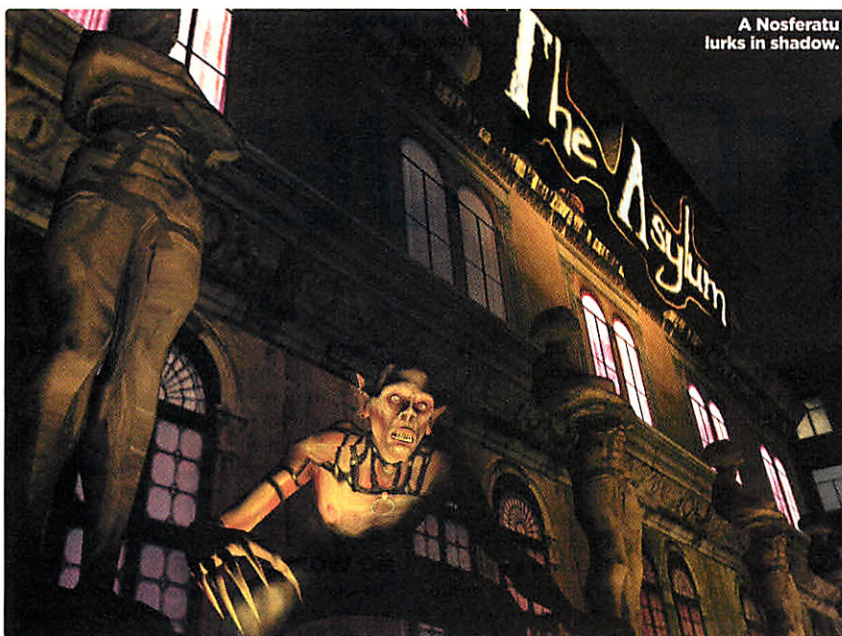


One of the most modestly dressed women in the game, which really could be titled *Vampire: Bustlines*.

I beat a man to death with a severed human arm last night. Actually, that's not true; I beat several men to death with a severed human arm. I also hacked my way through a cemetery full of brain-munching zombies, enslaved a gravely injured woman, stalked the sets of a snuff film operation, endured a brutal series of deadly experiments, and sometimes, just for fun, turned into a beastly juggernaut with razorlike claws and an unholy thirst for violence. Ah, good times, good times. It makes that whole cursed living dead thing somehow easier to deal with.

BLOOD SIMPLE

If you're looking for a game that will allow you to go on an unfettered neck-chomping rampage, you'll need to look elsewhere. Rampant vampirism in *Bloodlines* is quietly kept in check by two simple conceits: your character's humanity, which steadily dwindles with each inhuman act (killing an innocent, say) and could lead to a state of uncontrollable frenzy; and the eponymous masquerade, whereby all vampires basically pretend there's no such thing as vampires, the better to survive among unknowing mortals. Violate the masquerade too many times and a blood



A Nosferatu lurks in shadow.



Late in the game you'll have to contend with bands of tough vampire hunters. Suck 'em dry.

hunt will be called upon you by other vampires, you'll die, game over. Lose too much humanity and you'll frenzy unpredictably, thus breaking the masquerade, thus forcing a blood hunt, and so on. Balancing your growing powers and your character's needs within these restrictions gives the game a constant delicate sense of tension, of tenuous balance.

An intricate character-creation scheme drives *Bloodlines*, constantly forcing you to make crucial decisions about where to apply the drips and drops of experience that come your way from completing quests (there's no XP for fighting monsters, except for the bosses). There are seven different types of vampires, running the gamut from Nosferatu so hideous they must move about a city through the sewers since simply being seen by a human would violate the masquerade, to the slick, establishment-loving Ventrue, who fight and hunt through little more than their irresistible force of will.

Complicating things is a vast number of skills that can be developed—lock picking, stealth, hacking, seduction, spells, and more—to let you craft a personalized lord of the undead. This is great, but it does task the designers with creating quests and scenarios that accommodate a variety of play styles. A little too often this boils down to offering players air ducts or hackable computers in lieu of locks they can pick—then again, *System Shock 2* offered similar choices, and it ruled.

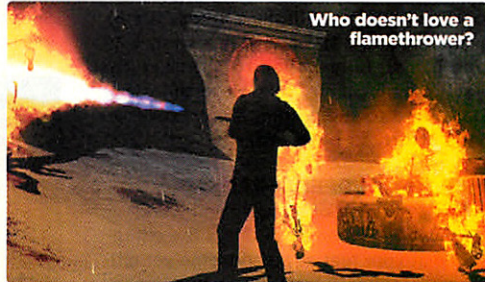
DEAD ALIVE

Where *Bloodlines* really shines is in the world it creates, a nightmarish hell lurking just beneath the seedy surface of nighttime Los Angeles. While your character spends most of the game tracking down a missing sarcophagus that could presage the end of all vampires, you'll delve into some of the most hypnotically twisted environments (a haunted hotel and a crack house full of shambling dead stand out) and meet some of the most demonic beings imaginable.

Bloodlines looks like a first-person shooter, but it isn't. Even with the variety of vampires, much of the gameplay emphasizes stealth. This is good, because combat—particularly the third-person melee combat—is awkward at best. Fortunately, your vampire should mostly outmatch anything it runs up against, so fighting anything except some bosses shouldn't be too tough. So much of this game is spent uncovering the intrigue of vampire society, you'll likely be too involved in the story to mind the clumsiness of some battles.

THE HATEFUL DEAD

Unfortunately, *Bloodlines* has so many rough edges you could use the CDs as saw blades. Chief among these are some insanely long level-load times—we're talking close to two minutes on a good machine. Once loaded,



Who doesn't love a flamethrower?

even the smaller levels can chug painfully at maybe one frame a second, complete with some ugly stuttering audio. Broken A.I. resulted in the entertaining "enemy running in place" phenomenon, and clipping issues plunged my character out of the game world into a black computer netherworld.

OK, so the Source engine still has some kinks to be worked out. But *Bloodlines* has some questionable things in its very design. There are too few character models, making every hooker in a city a clone and making Billy Idol so very proud, as nearly every person in a nightclub is dancing with themselves. And I feel that if I stealthily kill every guard in a temple, then I should enjoy the luxury of not having new ones suddenly appear in their place. There's more, but I'll stop here.

As annoying as these things are—and they are plenty annoying—they still can't detract from a game that creates such a darkly captivating world. The cliffhanger ending of *Bloodlines* has me thirsting for a sequel already. **X Robert Coffey**

Verdict ★★★★★

A massive, hypnotic RPG that might go from "really good" to "great" once they patch it.

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