

Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines

Distributor

Activision

Developer

Troika

Price

\$99.95

OFLC

MA15+

Out

Now

URL

www.vampirebloodlines.com/

HEY, IT DOESN'T SUCK!

Reviewing Vampire Bloodlines is kind of tricky, and that's because it ranges from being fantastic to being a pain in the neck, all depending on how you look at it. From a pure role-playing game perspective, Bloodlines is one darkly beautiful and seductive creature that puts Elvira to shame. From an action point of view, it's a little iffy, like a vampire taking on a guy with lots of scars and a silver knife in his hands. From a pure code and engine optimisation level, well, then it's just a little scary.

Since I can deal with screen stutters more easily than corny dialogue, I'm going to give it the benefit of the doubt and start with the good stuff.

First and foremost, Bloodlines is crammed with extraordinary writing and silky dialogue. One of the characters, Jeanette, just has the most awesome goth-chic lines. When you ask her name she says: "I'm the fingers down your back when the lights go out. I'm the name on the

one moment you're Solid Snake planting explosives; next you're James Bond seducing your way

men's room walls. When I pout, the whole world wants to make me smile..."

From end to end the characters are brilliant, from the voice acting to the crazy perspectives of a world going to hell, and right down to facial expressions and lip syncing.

The rest of the RPG elements are almost as hypnotic. It offers meaningful character development as well as non-combat skills that provide a variety of ways through missions. It features a world that not only tracks your actions, but also notices things like the type of vampire you are (your clan) as well as your gender and alters NPC reactions appropriately.

Merely the way you talk to contacts can make all of the difference and each choice you make is reflected in your path to one of five distinct endings. Before you leave the first hub of Santa Monica, you have to kill one contact and there's a second one who doesn't always make it through



the night. These choices aren't a matter of just picking a fight; it's more along the lines of picking a loyalty and watching the fallout take shape.

From the opening scene, players find themselves caught in a political battle between the Anarchs who have run LA for years, and the ruling Camarilla which has decided to swan in and re-establish order for its lost children. Down the line your choices have a real impact — not just for the Anarchs and Camarilla — but in the missions that pop up and the resources you have to draw on.

The World of Darkness is just that kind of place, and Troika brings it to stark unlife, capturing the stabbing colour that lights up the endless night. Sometimes you feel like you're in an old detective story as you track bail-jumpers or serial killers; at other times you're in a schlock horror movie as endless zombies come shuffling your way. One moment you're Solid Snake slipping in and planting explosives; next you're James Bond seducing your way through the night. All of this is told in a style that doesn't pull any punches. It's dark, clever and full of barbed wire wit. This is very much a mature content game, folks, in terms

Better than Deus Ex: Invisible War



Worse than Planescape: Torment



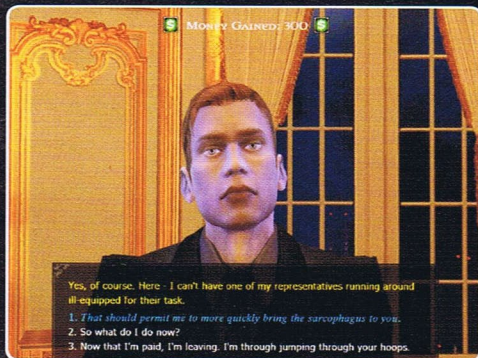
NEED

1.2Ghz CPU
384 RAM
64Mb Videocard
3.3Gb hard drive space

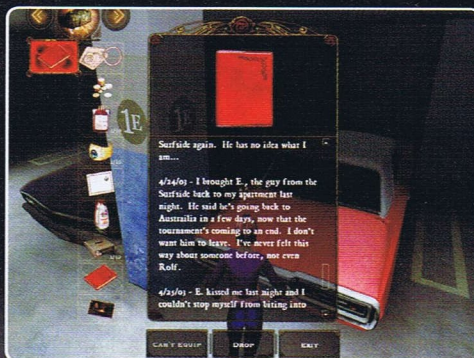
WANT

2.4 Ghz+ CPU
512 RAM
128Mb Videocard

ACTION ON A MISSION



1 It almost always starts with a chatty NPC. Notice the blue writing? That's an option to let me use a skill to influence things in my favour.



2 Being a RPG, what comes next includes everything from simple puzzles, questioning people, hacking computers and clue hunting. What's in the back of this car?



3 Usually, things take a nasty turn in the world of darkness and that means a climactic battle (or in this case, beating up some thugs). Mission complete exp is just a few punches away.



SNAPSHOT

- 1 Here's the hideous bad guy standing between me and my Nosferatu. The speech is over, now it's time to rumble.
- 2 This tracks our bad-guy's health. Take that, and that, and that!
- 3 Here's my health bar. The yellow represents aggravated damage (which is particularly nasty) and the aqua equals my remaining health.
- 4 This is my blood. It powers my vampiric abilities. At the moment I'm running on empty, but that's okay because I have some full blood bags tucked away.
- 5 All those names are a list of the supernatural powers I have going, and the bar next to them represents how much longer they are going to last. As you can see I'm really burning blood in this fight ... but hey, this guy deserves it.
- 6 This represents my weapon: a knife. It's simple to use and it causes lethal damage to undead, unlike blunt objects and guns. I'll trade up to the fire axe one day.
- 7 These numbers keep track of the damage you're doling out. With quick knife combos it can add up.
- 8 This horror is here to make sure this is anything but a fair fight...
- 9 The red circle is his magic; the orange stuff is mine. Currently, I'm moving super fast, I have boosted all my physical stats, my senses are super keen and I'm radiating supernatural awesomeness.

SINGLE PLAYER

Dense and detailed role-playing experience. Side-quests, multiple endings.

MULTI PLAYER

None.

of horror, psychologically-shattered characters and even the cause and effect of the options with which you are presented.

It's all pretty tight, but there are a few problems. The first problem with the fighting is that sometimes you can't avoid it. Sure, my Toreador charm got me missions and items no one else could get, and my seduction gave me free blood courtesy of feeding on all of the best-looking humans in night clubs across the land, but it didn't help me one whit when a scripted maniac busts through the door I was planning to escape through. Let's just say that there are certain climactic choke-points where you have to get hands-on to win the night.

In a way this is a pity, not just because it limits your RPG freedom, but because the combat gets

a little out of hand. It combines action elements — like targeting and movement — but uses your character's skills to determine your ability to hit, how much damage you do and so on.

It's good in theory, but ends up being a bit lop-sided and fiddly. Hand-to-hand often comes down to mashing with well-timed use of blood,

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and guns get put to shame by sharp objects every time except when you use the environment to stump the combat AI into uselessness. It's not like the system bites, it's just a little rough.

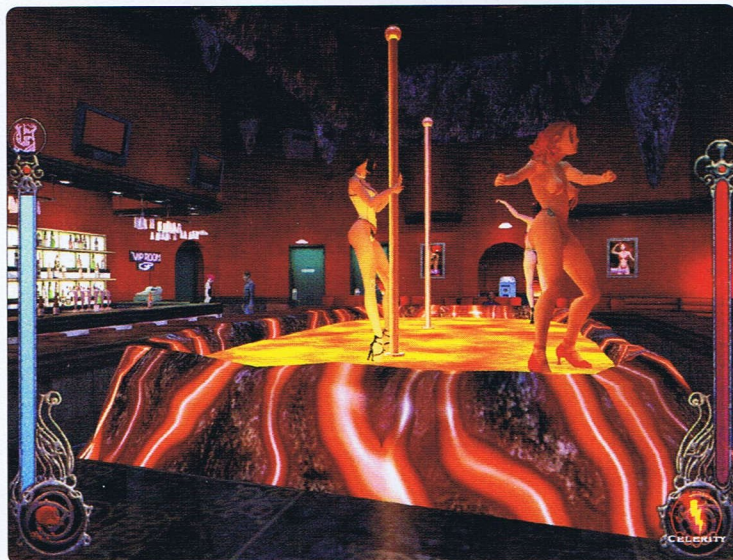
But if the combat is like a vampire's weakness to silver, then the rocky implementation of the Source engine is the game's sunlight.

It chugs a little on systems that it shouldn't, the graphics will stutter from time to time (for no good reason) and the load times can really drag if you're machine isn't a beast. While the facial animation is usually solid, you'll occasionally see details drop out of the game or characters glide along the ground instead of walking, and a character milling in a doorway will completely block your path. What's more, I only got this review because our esteemed editor couldn't get the game to play past the tutorial. Even so, Bloodlines is a mighty seductive creature.

I'm more into games than technology so, for me, the writing alone was worth the price of admission, and the little plot branches, wound-deep world, alternate paths, interesting side-quests and blood-thick atmosphere kept me wanting more even as my PC waded through pear-shaped code. If you're a RPG tech-whore, then maybe you should wait for a patch or two before embracing this sucker.

Timothy C. Best

BELOW Oh dear, we're getting flashbacks to the Eidos party.



VERDICT

- + Responsive World
- + Excellent Writing
- + Multiple paths
- + Graphics Bugs
- Unruly Combat
- Load screens

A fantastic and twisting journey into the World of Darkness ... if you can deal with the gremlins.

9 /10