VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

■ Each hub of the game leads to numerous sub-maps where missions can be undertaken, such as blowing all kinds of things up.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Troika Games
RELEASE: Oct '04
GENRE: Action RPG
PLAYERS: 1-TBC

■ The pencil-and-paper RPG evolves again from its previous game form into an action FPS that's heavy on the role-playing elements.

WHO SAYS A COMPLEX RPG HAS TO BE BORING, EH?

Just the thought of transferring one of the most revered pencil-and-paper role-playing games to the videogame format is one that we suspect would send many developers running for the hills. But it's a task that Troika Games has taken up with some relish, despite the possibility of a horde of fanatical players coming down on its head should it mess up. Not that it's planning to, going on how well *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* is coming along.

Something of a departure from *Redemption* (the last attempt at bringing White Wolf's *Vampire* series to the videogame medium), the most obvious comparison you can make with Bloodlines is that it's *Deus Ex: Invisible War* with vampires; a first-person shooter with distinct RPG elements. However, Troika sees things the other way. "What we're doing differently from any other game out there is that *Bloodlines* is an RPG first,"

NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

While fans will lap up the latest videogame outing for the *Vampire* series, Troika is keen to point out that the game is designed with devotees *and* absolute beginners in mind. The game's relatively simple interface and attribute system are easy enough for even the most clueless *Vampire* player to grasp. However, gamers who are already familiar with the *Vampire* universe will find every possible feature at their disposal, right down to the stat-covered character sheet that every player needs. It's this integration of the in-depth *Vampire* concept into a relatively simple FPS-style game that helps make *Bloodlines* accessible, without alienating hardcore fans.

says Thaine Lyman, executive producer at Activision. "It's always been an RPG, which is one of the reasons why Troika is the developer because it's got a strong background in RPG development. This is a hardcore RPG with all the elements that you're used to, but then with new concepts from the first-person action world. Other games that are playing in that space go the opposite way by being shooters with RPG elements added in later."

The emphasis on the RPG side of things is reassuring, and it's obvious that the use of Valve's *Half-Life 2* engine is no bad thing – particularly as RPGs have traditionally been one step behind the FPS genre in terms of graphical quality. But that's not the only way that *Bloodlines* is hoping to best its competitors – another advantage is the ease with which it allows players to customise their gameplay experience. The game features all seven authentic Masquerade clans from which to choose, so even something as simple as picking a character can have a massive effect on how you have to approach the game's missions.

Each clan has its own strengths and weaknesses, which in turn means you have to adapt your style of play to suit each situation. Playing as the violent Brujah, for example, makes you better

suited to facing enemies head-on; the elegant Toreador is more adept at talking their way out of situations with persuasion; and the hideous Nosferatu would have you sticking to the shadows to take advantage of their stealth abilities.

"The ability to… be the vampire of your own choosing is a big deal for us," says Lyman. "Whether you're the more social, seductive, 'imposing your will upon others' kind of vampire, the hideous creature who skulks around in the shadows, or just the feral killing machine who transforms and grows claws – every one of those is a valid path through the game. You can still play against type, though – the clans are more a basic template than a straitjacket that restricts what you do."

And it's this freedom of choice that gives us hope for *Bloodlines*. Just as *Invisible War* gave you more than enough chances to shape your destiny, so *Bloodlines* allows you to explore the world as you see fit and become the vampire you want to be. Set across four massive hub areas – Los Angeles, Santa Monica, Hollywood and Chinatown – and with an extensive story arc that changes depending on how you play, there's more than enough potential in *Bloodlines* to make it a great game.

"MIXING THE VAMPIRE SERIES WITH AN FPS FORMULA MEANS BLOODLINES CAN BE AS SIMPLE OR COMPLEX AS YOU WANT"

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COMPANY PROFILE

■ Formed in 1991, White Wolf Publishing was established with the aim of redefining the art of storytelling. Constantly stretching the boundaries of artistic entertainment through the horror, sci-fi and fantasy genres, the company has expanded from its base of role-playing and mass-market fiction to encompass videogames, television and cinema.

HISTORY

■ MAGE: THE ASCENSION 2000 [N/A]
■ WEREWOLF: THE APOCALYPSE 2000 [N/A]
■ VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE 1998 [N/A]

■ The Nosferatu are particularly hideous beasts, so it's best to stay in the shadows if you decide to play as one of them.

■ Pretty she may be, but you want to be careful of who you talk to in darkened clubs – you never know who might be listening.

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

SOMETHING TO GET YOUR TEETH INTO

HALF-LIFE 2 + DEUS EX × VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE = V: TM – BLOODLINES

■ Being an unstoppable vampire-killing machine is all very well, but there's something to be said for the more subtle approach.

"THE HALF-LIFE 2 ENGINE IS VERY MUCH GEARED TOWARDS FIRST-PERSON GAMEPLAY, AND WE LOVE THAT BECAUSE IT'S SO IMMEDIATE"

LEONARD BOYARSKY, CEO, TROIKA GAMES