Combat is most bearable when it's intentionally dumb, as in the sidequest that requires you to beat the restless occupants of a Hollywood cemetary back into their graves
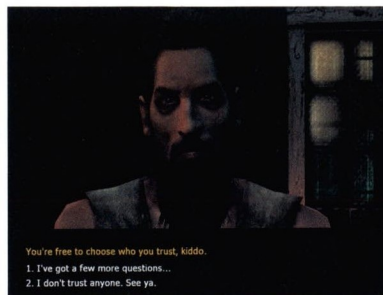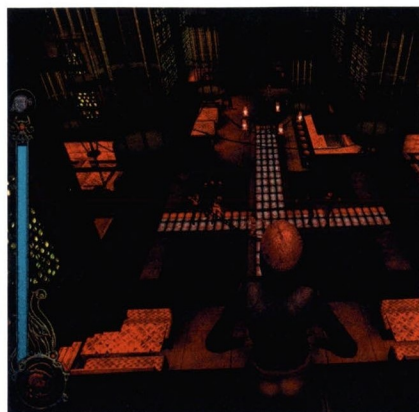
VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE BLOODLINES

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: TROIKA
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138

LA is broken into four hub areas, accessible by a vampiric taxi service (below). It's appropriate, as sadly there's so little to do out on the town that you're simply a tourist

The physical-oriented vampire clans have it easiest in *Bloodlines*, as it's a simple, if neither strategic nor rewarding, matter to keep all their vampiric powers running and hack down respawning enemy crowds

With Troika, refugees from the *Fallout* design team, building a suitably sordid narrative with Valve's Source engine, *Bloodlines* seemed to have the winning formula to give the Vampire RPG a *Deus Ex* treatment. And it still feels like it should have worked, as even riddled with glitches from spelling errors to crash bugs, the game's bruised, nocturnal LA perfectly portrays the present-apocalyptic Vampire world. Taking your custom protagonist out into the LA nightlife and unlife is initially beguiling, and your vampiric kin are confidently and seductively well-written.

But where NPC dialogue is suitably arch, your own lines are often cringingly sophomoric, making it difficult to roleplay anything other than an unadventurous roleplayer. Though social skills appreciably affect conversation – smooth talkers receive additional choices whereas the uncouth have their dialogue trees pruned back – you'll seldom steer NPCs far from their preordained

monologues or keep them talking once their role in the plot is fulfilled. Revisiting old friends and enemies is usually fruitless, and wastes a setting as incestuously social as Vampire's, leaving the sense that the social pond is too frozen for your actions to make unscripted ripples.

Resigned to your fate as errand-corpse, not free agent (your character bemoaning constantly being sent on dungeon crawls doesn't quite excuse constantly being sent on dungeon crawls), *Bloodlines*' missions are far less interesting than the character interaction. An early railyard raid is promisingly conducive to different play styles, but it's an exception to the later rule of box-room-and-corridor slogs that belittle character choice: you can create any vampire you like, so long as it can fight scores of enemies. Neither thirdperson melee combat nor firstperson shooting are particularly comfortable, and stealth is fraught for all the wrong reasons, though both stealth and

melee can be abusively overpowered.

Bloodlines could have been so much more with so much less. The plot draws on an unnecessarily large swathe of the Vampire mythos, presumably to make the storyline seem deeper than it actually is, but in practice leaving it disconnected. The horror is all gore and jump scares, with the far more affecting, personal horror of your vampiric condition almost entirely skirted. There's no sense of the crippling addiction and hunger for blood, as feeding is an utterly perfunctory power-bar-filling affair, nor the loss of your mortal life and desires (the latter is explained to you despite nearly every female character being underdressed and oversexualised).

Forgiving the source material's brow-clutching indulgences, it succeeded in providing a soul behind the vampire cliché, to be more than The Lost Boys set to a D&D beat, and that soul is something *Bloodlines* only sporadically channels. It remains compelling, but much of that compulsion is in expecting the game to truly deliver – a moment you'll likely still be awaiting at the anticlimactic conclusion. **[6]**

The quality of NPC facial modeling and voice acting varies (though the animation is almost universally impressive), but when both are at their strongest *Bloodlines* offers some truly engaging one-way conversation

Vampyr's little helper

It's possible to gain a blood-bound human companion to guard your upmarket apartment lair – though as the sun never rises during gameplay, it's by no means a necessity – but this is as limited, and uncomfortably misogynistic, as Troika's take on marriage in *Fallout 2*. The most well-intentioned interaction possible is to turf her out, with the majority involving bullying her for blood, money or into wearing more revealing attire. Gentler souls who just wanted a shoulder upon which to cry tears of blood will be disappointed.