

# VAMPIRE BLOODLINES

Something to get your teeth into

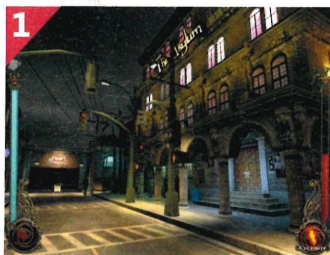


Vampiric weaknesses include a stake through the heart. Though, to be honest, that works on virtually everyone.

## BLOOD BANK

### The thing I could never stand about Los Angeles...

Four central hubs provide the backbone of the game. They're packed full of bloodsuckers and prey.



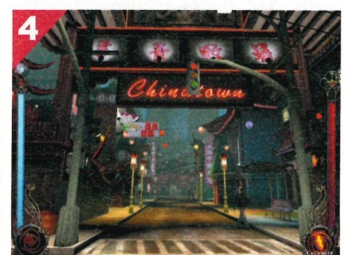
**1** Santa Monica is the start of the game. Why not hit the Asylum club for cheerful conversation, dancing and blood drinking.



**2** Head downtown and soak up the atmosphere of this great city, then suck up plague-suffering street people.



**3** Hollywood is most noticeable in *Vampire* for having the highest concentration of sleazy locations. Which is going some.



**4** The last opened area, Chinatown is home to stuff which – er – to even describe properly would be a little too spoiler heavy.





Speaking generally, Vampires prefer to have their food fresh and raw. But everyone loves a barbeque.



"Oh - you turned down Tracy of Inverness. Now - let's meet your Blind Date tonight"

**P**ut simply this is one of my games of the year, and I still can't score it higher than the mid-seventies.

It's elated and moved me, both to delight and despair. For the first 20 or so hours, this was the next *Planescape Torment*, but by the end I realised it's more this year's *Ultima Ascension*. It started as *Deus Ex* with vampires, but finished like *Bloodrayne*... but with, uh... oh. Fuggetit.

While *Bloodlines* is based on the White Wolf pen-and-paper source material (essentially, Anne Rice-style revisionist vampires with a gothic-punk edge) there's no connection bar the setting to *Vampire: Redemption*, Nihilistic's *Diablo*-esque slasher from a couple of years back. Instead, you're a childe who no soon as wakes from the embrace of his sire than he's dragged to the Prince before he can ask anyone what the words 'childe', 'embrace', 'sire' and 'prince' mean. Cue political intrigue between Vampiric factions, all wishing to rule Los Angeles and you running wild in an *Ion-Storm*-like sim on Santa Monica's streets.

*Bloodlines* uses the hub-system seen in *Thief*, *Invisible War* and Bioware's *KOTOR*, with mini-levels huddled around a living environment. However, if you were disappointed in *Invisible*

*War*, then *Bloodlines* offers redemption. Leaping out of the butch action closet, it wears its RPG statistics loud and proud.

It also succeeds where *Vampire: Redemption* failed. *Bloodlines* gives

Levellers fans prove troublesome foes. Put them out of their misery.



**Wears RPG statistics loud and proud**

you a real sense of what it's like to prowl the night as both hunter and hunted. The cities, full of pedestrians, street-walkers and police respond to your presence. The *GTA*-style dynamics are natural now - attack someone and expect them to run away, and the police to hunt you down. Though there are other factors to consider. If you violate the Masquerade (Vampire laws: essentially "For God's sake, don't let them know we exist. They have flamethrowers") you eventually attract vampire hunters and a 'game over'. Central

to the gameplay is getting blood, which powers your supernatural abilities. Sure, you can suck on a few sewer rats, but a better feast can be found topside. A trip to the blood-banks can get you chilled blood for cold cash, but luring people into some secluded corner in your own style is more satisfying.

That "in your own style" needs to be underlined. This is a game that takes multi-tasking seriously. While options tend to be a little more digital rather than the smoothly analogue *Deus Ex* (for example, unlocking a

conversation option when you have a skill at a certain level) they're still prominent. Take an early scene where you have to recover explosives from a beach-based gang. Sneak in. Go in guns blazing. *Vampire* doesn't care, letting you express yourself in your own way. In fact, it even takes it further. There are separate skills for intimidating, seducing or persuading people, which for your correspondent turned the entire first half of the game into the world's first slut-'em-up. Especially admirable is how each of the seven playable vampire clans are vividly realised, leading to a personalised experience. While some fall into stealth and ►

#### Thumbnail Review

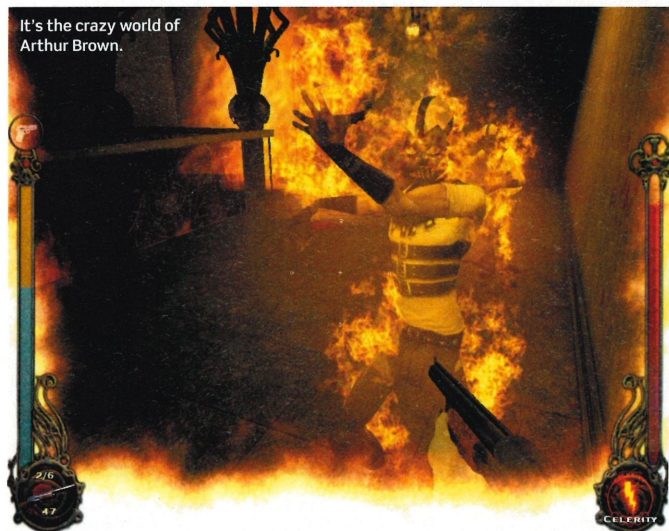
Drink deeply from the pulsing neck of a warm RPG

- ✓ Party all night
- ✓ Sleep all day
- ✓ Vampires are fun
- ✓ Good dentists

The streets of LA make a perfect gothic setting for vampiric stalkings. Feed on the action, the RPG and the excellent script.



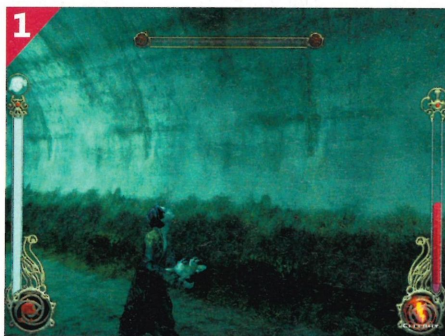
## VAMPIRE: BLOODLINES



## BLOOD LUST

## A quick bite to eat

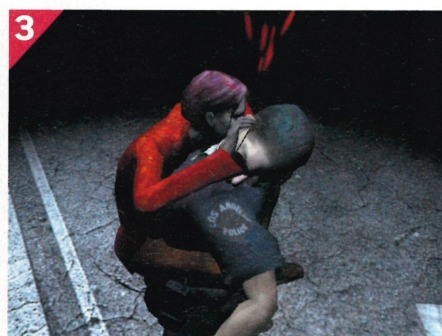
A growing vampire has a big appetite. Here's a few ways to satisfy that dark craving.



A rat will fill the hole, but it's hardly a good square meal. Your vampire mom would be disgusted with you. You'd better get out on the streets and find yourself some real human nourishment.



While you can try and lure people into darkened alleyways to drink some of the red stuff, actually seducing someone is more inconspicuous. Alternatively for uglier kindred, why not pay a lady of the night.



Or, failing that, getting into a fight pretty much makes anyone's neck yours for the taking. If anyone's daft enough to have a go at you, they deserve to have the life blood sucked out of them. There's no place for guilt here.

violence-styled archetypes, there's joy in the details. For example, choose an inhuman appearing Nosferatu and you'll best spend the game running around the sewers avoiding screaming mobs. Alternatively, the insane Malkavians have every single one of their in-game lines transformed into inspired gibberish doggerel a la 'Tanks: like angry houses'. Or, for those lighter moments, be a thaumaturgy practicing Tremere and force your opponents to vomit blood and other boil-in-the-fleshbag pleasantries.

While *Vampire's* plot eventually falls short of the very best, it's always executed with the highest competence. The game is genuinely adult. That is, characters swear profusely, but only those whose character *would* swear profusely. It uses cultural references with glib abandon, entirely comfortable with referencing topics like fetish slang

without sounding like a teacher trying to be down with the kids. It's even comfortable on the topic of sex. Characters like Jeanette – the pigtailed cleavage with teeth – shine through the videogame cliché into fully realised individuals. If a character looks provocative, there's normally a good reason why.

This makes the NPCs some of the most memorable yet seen in videogaming. While the models aren't quite up to *Half-Life 2's* levels, they are still unprecedented for the RPG genre. Put it like this: there have been talkie-adventures for almost a decade now. Do you ever actually listen to all the dialogue, or rather turn on the subtitles, read and skip? I know I do. This is the first game that's ever made me sit back and savour every word. I even turn off the subtitles as they

distract from the character's impassioned performance. The populace of *Vampire's* world don't feel like computer sprites. They feel like actors.

Putting aside the game's major achievements, there's an array of lesser triumphs. Some of the stand alone levels – such as the Haunted House and the Incident with the Werewolf – are highly memorable. Genre-mainstays like

atmospheric computer hacking where you actually type as if you were using old DOS-style programs. The pleasure of taking someone who's had the audacity to attack you and sucking them dry never quite loses its appeal. In fact, speaking generally, it's certainly a game that plays to a darker thread of power fantasy than we're used to. While many games manage to be horrific and

hilarious, *Bloodlines* manages to be both, but only when it chooses.

At its best, it measures up to *Knights of the Old Republic*, while being even better written. Sadly, it doesn't quite manage to stay there. As you progress, the *Deus-Ex* multi-routing declines and increasingly you're thrown into straight slug-fests with mobs of opposing troops. Those who spent their XP on crafting a crafty Toreador with few combat skills are going to find it especially hard to fight wave after wave of respawning yakuza sorts. After this ordeal, the plot fumbles its denouement, which leaves it emotionally empty even after you realise how it's been cleverly foreshadowed. And there are a few constant bug-bears – the constant loading pauses grate and as an RPG, neither gun or close-combat matches up with a pure action game. The latter particularly makes the choice to descend into brawls bewildering.

Plays to a darker thread of power fantasy



# "Do something amazing, suck blood"

**OPEN ALL HOURS** But don't expect loveable Ronnie Barker to try and sell you soapflakes. This cheery little corner shop does a roaring trade in automatic weaponry. Not all buildings are as easy to get into - especially those related to missions.

**POLICE BRUTALITY** The fuzz aren't normally much of a problem, unless you do something like - say - discharge a shotgun in the middle of the street. And what sort of fool would do that?

**SURE SHOT** Not automatic weaponry, but close. The shotgun is especially useful for fighting vampires, as normal bullets are relatively ineffective against the undead.

**FARE DEAL** The trusty taxi allows you to get around LA. For no charge it can move you between each of the hubs you've unlocked, as well as to special locations for one-off missions.

It's like  
chewing  
ash. I felt  
betrayed

These fumbles drag *Bloodlines* down from the low nineties mark it had earned in the first half to somewhere in the theoretical mid-eighties. The rest disappears into... well, bugs. Here's a selection: Regular animation glitches and flickers. Mis-timed cut-scenes. Missing speech. Typos - by the time you're in Chinatown, every second line has them. Errors in scripting. Level reloads that break aesthetic or functional elements. What appears to be a memory leak during long sessions, causing increasing levels of slow-down both in loading and play. Stability

related crash bugs. Oh yes - one game-stopping bug that took a trip to a fansite to find a work around. It goes on and on, getting progressively more noticeable and unforgivable as the game slips from its high standards. By the time I finished its sizeable form - at least 40 hours play - it was like I was chewing ash. I felt betrayed.

Now, rumours abounded that *Vampire* had actually been completed a year ago, and Troika have had to sit on it until *Half-Life 2* was released. This seemed to be partially supported by *Vampire* being thrown onto the

shelves simultaneously with Valve's genre-redefining piece. These rumours, as rumours tend to be, are simply rubbish. My suspicion? There's some bloodsucker in a suit who decided this needed to be out ASAP to recoup cash. This game needed at least another two months of development polish, and someone decided they couldn't afford it. Whoever they are, they

need to be staked through the heart. Give me the implement, and I'd hammer it home myself.

With a couple of patches, expect *Bloodlines* to rise again. Until then, be sure to understand what half-glory, half-damned existence you're choosing before disturbing its rest, submitting to its embrace and prowling off into the eternal night.

KIERON GILLEN

**PCGAMER** A genre-expanding RPG

**IT'S** >Brilliantly written>An action RPG  
>Vulnerable to sunlight

**IT'S NOT** >For youngsters>That finished  
>Eating garlic, thank you

**Plaques**

**75%**