

MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

Y: The Last Man #60

Brian K. Vaughan, Pia Guerra

It was Garrison Keillor who wrote: “Years ago manhood was an opportunity for achievement, and now it is a problem to be overcome.” No more so is this the case than in writer Brian K. Vaughan and artist Pia Guerra’s post-apocalyptic serial *Y: The Last Man*. Set in the aftermath of a plague that, supposedly, kills everything on the planet with a Y chromosome, the story follows the last males on Earth; slacker/escapologist Yorick Brown and his helper-monkey Ampersand, as they trek across the globe to find his girlfriend Beth, last heard from in the Australian outback.

Yorick’s journey would be complicated enough without the aid of basic transport and communications infrastructure were it not also for his significance as humanity’s only hope in finding the cause of the plague, and maybe even a cure. To this end add the humourless Dr. Alison Mann (who knows more about the ‘gendercide’ than she lets on) and their protector, Agent 355 of the shadowy organisation ‘The Culper Ring’ - whose dalliances with mystical relics may also leave her with some explaining to do. Hot on our protagonists’ heels are a disparate group of idealists and maniacs ranging from a militant Amazonian movement, a ninja assassin, Yorick’s estranged sister Hero, and Alter, a suicidal Lt. Colonel in the Israeli Defence Force. Needless to say, a lot happens.

Finishing its run with issue 60, Vaughan has constructed a 50-page chamber piece where, through a series of flashbacks, we learn the permutations that made up the ‘happy ever after’ for the remaining protagonists after a dreary evening in Paris where everyone finally got together and everything fell apart. The result is a fine summation of the series, showing off what the Vaughan/Guerra team brought to the table; snappy dialogue, collegiate humour, character design that emphasises the face over the torso and a willingness to experiment with structure where a perfunctory, conservative approach would typically have been expected.

Yorick’s last hurrah takes place some 60 years into the future where cloning has taken over as the dominant form of procreation, his clones walk the Earth and universities are toying with the idea of letting male students through their doors. The focus of our attention briefly shifts to a 22-year-old clone of Yorick as he considers his options as a “free man”. Summoned to Paris by Yorick’s daughter, Beth, now French president, the visitor is given the task of amusing his ailing ‘father’, making the last man’s last moments more bearable than the many years preceding them.

Throughout the series Vaughan has thrown thematic and philosophical questions at the reader. How does the collective deal with grief? Can women get along without men? What new world order arises out of a situation where huge gaps in authority and skill suddenly appear? What do women do when the proverbial glass ceiling is lifted and the only thing blocking their progress is other women? What about the arts, and, God forbid, what of comics with no male geeks left to read them? As we see in issue 60, Vaughan’s answers range from a belief that science will out and that society will pick itself up through co-operation and common sense to some shoulder-shrugging pragmatism that if Truth doesn’t float your boat then Faith will still be around to pick up the pieces. What’s more the world will be a damn prettier place to boot. Who would have thought all the world needed was a little TLC in order to create a liberal, secular utopia? It’s here that the cracks in Vaughan’s worldview are on full show. As with the rest of the series’ characters, Yorick specifically, no one is shy of the sound of their own voices. The dialogue has a

tendency to descend into didacticism, trivia and one-liners and everyone seems to have a college education. Yorick's introduction to his alter ego, for example, is not the cynical rant of the broken hearted but a chance to impart the nugget of wisdom that Elvis had a twin brother. It should be noted that all knowledge of *The King* did not make it to the brave new world. One shudders to think about the fate of *The Duke*.

The flashbacks are a mixed bag. With lesbianism now the default romantic pairing in the world the term 'strange bedfellows' takes on a whole new meaning as some unlikely romances blossom. For the most part all Yorick has left are tales of woe as he recounts the loss of his companions. At the risk of giving too much away things start well then go downhill. Way downhill.

As the heart and soul of *Y's* success, Guerra's artwork is one part Jack Kirby one part Hernandez Bros., familiar enough to engage the fanboys while daring enough to show off some serious art-comics credibility. Her characters are all curves, clear skin and great hair without ever straying into outright T&A territory. The downside is her creations are designed with such loving care that it seems she is loathe to depict anything ugly. What violence there is here lacks grit and brutality. Blood is coloured ketchup red and wounds always seem clean and uncomplicated. Like everything in the series it's nice, maybe too nice.

Having mastered the art of the cliffhanger over the past five years Vaughan has developed a knack for tapping into his readership, giving them enough of what they know while throwing in some cheap thrills for good measure. Yorick is a recognisable and engaging protagonist, a post-slacker 'everygeek'. He likes magic, has a charitable streak, loves his girlfriend and is all at sea with the fairer sex. He's a dreamer and a misfit and relishes the role of the outcast, constantly playing spoilt child to his adopted aunts Mann and 355. When we meet him in the final issue he has styled himself as a dotty octogenarian, surrounded by helper monkeys and clad in a straightjacket. For all his ups and downs, however, you never get the sense that Yorick is in any danger. He's almost too precious a creation to injure, too much like his readership to be harmed lest people take it seriously. Couldn't they at least have given him a scar or something for his troubles?

As a series, *Y: The Last Man*, typified by its last issue, is an excellent piece of liberal sci-fi writing. According to Vaughan, people are essentially good, attractive and intelligent. Optimism is a virtue, wisdom and invention can be found in the most unlikely of places and science will save us all. Spirituality and superstition are overrated, unless you're on your last legs, democracy is a natural state of government that arises from any period of uncertainty and a good put-down can be every bit as effective as a punch to the chops.

If you buy into this Platonic worldview then *Y* is certainly the series you have been waiting for. It's a 'nice' read that engages the brain, has a few surprises and only mildly suffers from filler. If you're of a more Hobbesian bent then maybe the misanthropy of Alan Moore or brutality of Brian Azzarello's *100 Bullets* would be more your style.

Vaughan has since moved away from comics to work in television, currently writing for the similarly inoffensive *Lost*. Guerra will be moving on to a series of *Doctor Who* comics with writer Tony Lee. And before you ask, yes, they do use the obvious gag. But at least they left it as the last word in the series. On that alone they can take a bow.

Niall Kitson

Secret Files: Tunguska

(Developer: Dreamcatcher Interactive)

Platform: Multiple platforms: game reviewed on Nintendo DS

In 1908, an unexplained blast tore through the forests of Tunguska, Siberia. The explosion was the equivalent of 2,000 Hiroshima-strength atomic bombs. It destroyed 37 square miles of forest and the flash was seen across the planet. It's far reaching effects included people being able to read newspapers at night in England and Moscow looking like a bright summer's day at midnight. The explanations for the Tunguska explosion range from the credible (a massive meteor smashed into the planet) to the less credible (a UFO crashed into the forest and exploded) to the slightly mad (a tiny black hole formed above Tunguska and travelled straight through the planet, wrecking havoc across the planet - this theory was discredited on the grounds that Helsinki, on the other side of the planet from Tunguska, wasn't turned into a steaming pile of rubble). The explosion at Tunguska has been a favourite of conspiracy theorists for decades, giving rise to hundreds of books and even the occasional film and television show (including, unsurprisingly, *The X-Files*)

In 2006, game developer Dreamcatcher Interactive added to the theories with its point and click adventure *Secret Files: Tunguska*, which has now been released as a DS game. *Secret files* follows the story of Nina Kalenkov, a Berlin-based motorcycle mechanic (no, really) who's father works at a local museum. Upon calling in to visit her father at work one day, Nina discovers that something untoward has happened. Her father is missing and his office in complete disarray, obviously having been searched by someone. The only clue as to what happened is from gleaned from the museum's alcoholic caretaker, who is found hiding in a cupboard muttering about flying men in black robes with no faces.

The game follows Nina (and later on, her father's colleague Max) as they investigate the reasons why her father has disappeared and what it has to do with a mysterious expedition to Tunguska in the 1960's.

The game follows a traditional point and click interface, a method of gameplay that has been in use since the early 1980's (LucasArts *Escape from Monkey Island* is a classic example of this gameplay type). This method of gameplay has since gone out of fashion with programmers and players, generally replaced by the more interactive methods supplied by 3D graphics (a game which exemplifies this approach is the *Resident Evil* series which combines puzzle solving with lots of gory action). Point and Click adventures revolve around puzzle solving and exploring rather than action and gunplay, and *Secret Files* is no different in this respect.

The game is based on static screens, explored through a magnifying glass icon that highlights areas of interest. Various objects picked up along the way must be combined in order to solve puzzles and progress through the game.

All actions can be controlled via the stylus, making the game perfect for the DS's touch-screen interface. However, whilst graphically the game is excellent, the sheer number of puzzles soon becomes infuriating. The first room in the game is Nina's father's office. You gather up a number of random objects in this room (including everything from a bowl of water, a rock and some aloe vera), some of which will not be used for a considerable length of time in a completely different section of the game.

There is no indication of this within the game script, resulting in the player (at least certainly this one) spending 15 minutes randomly combining items and trying things out to see if that completes obvious puzzles which can not be completed until you go to other parts of the game and then return later. Some of

the puzzles also involve less than obvious solutions. At one point, in order to listen in on a phone conversation, you have to sellotape a mobile phone to a cat, which to my mind is a tad random. Also, if you've ever tried to sellotape anything to a cat in real life you'll find out that they really don't like it and the process will probably leave you with permanent scarring...

The sheer number and difficulty of the puzzles in *Secret Files* soon becomes frustrating and lessens the pleasure at playing such a graphically accomplished game. This slows gameplay to a snails pace, resulting in players having to force themselves to play through the game to reach the end. Also of note is the section in which you visit Ireland, which plays up on any number of stereotypes – one puzzle involves bribing a fisherman with a bottle of whiskey and much of the action takes place at the local pub or at the local Lord's Castle (who sounds more Scottish than Irish). Begorrah indeed.

Horror elements within the game are also limited despite its obvious Fortean influences. This is mostly due to the games style and choice of puzzles: it's difficult to experience any sense of horror or menace when you're busy trying to attach a hose pipe to a urinal in order to progress to the next challenge...

Still, it has to be said that *Secret Files: Tunguska* is a good example of a Point and Click adventure and is a perfect game for the DS stylus interface. However, the slow gameplay and sheer difficulty of the puzzles removes much of the enjoyment from the game, as does the general lack of humour (cat and urinals aside) and fact that much of the dialogue is pretty badly written. These factors help discourage the player from caring about the characters and, in my case at least, interest waned long before the game had been completed.

If you're a fan of point and click adventures and puzzle heavy games such as *Hotel Dusk*, then *Secret Files: Tunguska* may well be of interest. However, if you prefer your DS games be short bursts of frenetic fun then it is best avoided and you're better off investing in something a little less cerebral and a lot less frustrating.

Eoin Murphy

Secret Files: Tunguska

Graphics: 8

Gameplay: 5

Sound: 7

Replay Value: 4

Overall Score: 6

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: The Black Dossier

(America's Best Comics, 2007)

Written by Alan Moore and Drawn by Kevin O'Neill

The Black Dossier, the third addition to Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series is apparently intended to serve as a stand-alone stop gap between Volume 2 and 3 of the ongoing series rather than as a fully fleshed instalment in its own right. As such, fans who have been salivating over this much-delayed release (indeed, the book is presently still only available in the United States) may well be slightly disappointed by what is on offer here. *The Black Dossier* is the weakest so far of Moore's LXG efforts, and that is for two main reasons. First of these is the fact that it is, as the title indicates, a 'dossier' containing details of the history and development of the league, and as such is by necessity rather uneven and episodic. Second is the fact that that the contents of the dossier will be nigh on incomprehensible to anyone who has not closely read the previous two volumes, or who, furthermore, does not have a fairly exhaustive knowledge of Victorian and early-mid Twentieth-Century popular literature. That in itself is by no means a bad thing – and indeed, the pleasure one gets from playing “spot the reference” whilst perusing Moore's work here is, as ever, considerable – but all the same, there are occasions here when wry intertextuality is in danger of becoming outright pretension, and those who are not hardcore fans of Moore's erudite and playfully demanding scripts may find themselves somewhat at a loss. In other words, if you want to introduce Moore's work to a newcomer, start elsewhere.

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen has a premise rather similar to that of Kim Newman's classic alternative universe novel *Anno Dracula* (1992) which also features a disparate band of characters culled from Victorian popular literature. The line-up in the first two volumes consisted of H. Rider Haggard's Allan Quatermain, Bram Stoker's heroine Mina Murray, H.G. Wells Invisible Man, R.L. Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and Jules's Verne's Captain Nemo, not to mention more cameo appearances from other literary creations both well known and obscure.

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen has often (and simplistically) been described as a kind of Victorian *X-Men*, and it is presumably this misleadingly reductive appellation which meant that the rights to the first volume were snapped up by Hollywood and subjected to one of the silliest, most appallingly illiterate screen translations of recent years. Moore's complex, humane and uncompromisingly intelligent comic books have never been well served by film makers – see also the film adaptations of *V for Vendetta* and *From Hell*– but Stephen Norrington's version was something of a new low, adding as it did some remarkably unnecessary new characters to the original line-up (namely Stuart Townsend as a blandly sinister Dorian Grey, and the incredibly annoying Shane West as a gee-whiz Tom Sawyer) and some bafflingly unnecessary alterations to those that remained (Mina Murray is now a vampire (!), and fallen imperial hero Allan Quatermain is no longer an opium addict). Needless to say, it was not a success.

The Black Dossier is the first new addition to the series since, and as such is apparently intended to provide an insight into the background of both the league readers will be familiar with as well as serving as a kind of wry unofficial 'history' of the organisation in general. As with the previous volumes, one can take an obsessive delight in each panel, due to the fact that practically every minor character and seemingly throwaway detail contains a sly (or not so sly) reference or allusion to be deciphered by the faithful. However, unlike as in Volumes One and Two, in which the marginalia and esoterica was buttressed by a compelling overall story line (the nefarious designs of Fu Manchu style character in the first story and the attack of H.G. Well's Martian invaders in the second), here, the wraparound story here

is a rather abbreviated and perfunctory chase narrative set in an austere and conformist post-fascist 1950s Britain. Here the ever-youthful Murray and Quatermain, (having gained immortality in a blink-and-you'll miss it aside in the appendix of the second volume), steal the titular dossier from the Ministry of Defence and are chased across the country by a duo of ruthless secret agents. In a typically nice touch, the agents who pursue our hero and heroine are none other than "Jimmy" Bond (depicted as a psychotic would-be rapist) and the sex-obsessed and sadistic Emma Night (a younger and much less likable version of Mrs Peel from *The Avengers*).

The main storyline is in itself fairly clever and enjoyable, if undeniably lightweight and contains a wealth of clever pop culture and literary allusions and pastiches on each page. Similarly, the actual book – or at least the American hard back edition in my possession – is a delightful artefact in its own right, which comes complete with 3-D glasses to be used when reading the final few pages, set in the surreal "Blazing World" first imagined by Margaret Cavendish, which seems to serve as a kind of nexus between all possible worlds, both real and imagined. As for the documents contained in the dossier themselves: well, hardcore fans of the first two instalments will find much to enjoy here, and as ever, O'Neill and Moore's design is witty and appealing, with both men obviously relishing the opportunity to engage in entertaining literary and artistic pastiches. These include: civil service documents written in Orwell's "Unspeak"; a pornographic Tijuana Bible from the same era; a postscript to John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* and a parody of Shakespeare detailing the creation of the "original" league in the time of the Faerie Queen Gloriana (a kind of parallel universe Elizabeth the First), as well as the short story "What Ho, Gods of the Abyss" (which combines P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves and Wooster with Lovecraft's Cthulu mythos to hilarious effect) and an authentically incomprehensible extract from the work of a fictional beatnik writer who apparently encountered Murray and Quatermain in Post-War San Francisco. As ever, O'Neill's expressive and painstakingly detailed artwork – he's particularly good at capturing facial expressions – contributes immensely to proceedings, to the extent that it's nigh on impossible to imagine the series without him.

What *The Black Dossier* essentially does then is fill in the gaps between what happened to the League between the end of the last volume (about 1898) and the likely beginning of the highly-ambitious and much anticipated next volume, to be entitled "Century", which is scheduled for initial publication in 2009 and will take the adventures of the league right upon to the present day. As such, the undeniably episodic, somewhat insubstantial, and, dare I say it, occasionally self-indulgent *The Black Dossier* will not suit all tastes, but nevertheless, it is still a dauntingly well researched, erudite, and above all, playful addition to the a remarkably entertaining series, if not quite up to the dauntingly high standards of its predecessors.

Kelly Grant

Dementia: The Ward
 (Developer: Renegade Kid)
 Platform: Nintendo DS

If there's any one building that has suffered at the hands of videogame developers over recent years, it has to be the hospital. *Silent Hill* filled one with blank faced nurses wielding scalpels, *Resident Evil* occupied its hospital with zombies and *The Suffering* populated theirs with monsters that wanted to rend and tear human flesh.

And now along comes *Dementia: The Ward*.

Unusually for a horror RPG, *Dementia: The Ward* is played from a first person perspective, and the opening of the game immediately immerses the player into their character. There is no back story, and no opening CGI: your avatar just wakes up in a hospital bed following a crack of lightning, disoriented and wondering just what the hell is going on. Initial hints abound: for instance, the word 'murderer' is scrawled on blood on the walls (which is seldom a good sign). The first glimpse of a monster is when you walk into the hallway to see a massive creature dragging a screaming woman through the hallway by her hair. This approach - dropping the player straight into the gameplay without any preliminary preamble - serves to create a strong sense of curiosity and encourages exploration of the environment through dark hallways illuminated only through broken lamps with the aid of a handy flashlight discovered in a nearby cupboard.

The atmosphere of the game is augmented by the clever use of sound. The game is perhaps best played with a set of headphones connected to the DS, so that the sound surrounds you and helps bring you further into the game, starting at every creak of a door and blip of a heart monitor (of which there are a lot!).

The graphics are excellent for the DS, which does not have the power of other rival handheld console the PSP (Playstation Portable). The graphics are reminiscent of the original *Silent Hill* on the Playstation One, and indeed, the limitations of the platform's capabilities actually add to the overall game atmosphere. Where *Silent Hill* used fog to limit the amount of pop up (pop up is when a building or object suddenly appears on the screen, rather than emerging gradually), *Dementia* makes use of the dark hospital lighting and length of corridors to ensure this is not an issue. The game's developers make good use of lighting effects. As previously noted, the gamer is provided early in the game with a flash light with which to navigate through the hospital corridors. In a similar method to that employed by Id Software's *Doom 3*, the player has to switch between the torch and weapons to defend themselves. This adds an extra level of strategy, because the player has to switch between the flashlight and weapons to fend off creature attacks.

Enemy models are again taken from a similar stable as that of *Silent Hill*, as the hideously misshapen results of monstrous scientific experiments roam the halls. The first enemies you meet are humanoid, their heads distorted by massive fanged mouths and an open chest cavity through which you can see their hearts. One caste of enemy is introduced when you pass through the infant ward and glimpse incubators through large glass windows. Once you get near them you realise the incubators are occupied by baby sized worms which then swarm around you, filling the screen with red blurs as you take damage and desperately search for a way out of the room.

Both DS screens are made use of, with the top screen showing the game screen and the touch screen providing information on health and items held.

The game is controlled through a combination of the stylus and the left side of the DS (although this can be altered depending on the individual gamers playing style). The stylus is used to control where you look and aim once you get access to fire arms) and the left hand controls the d-pad which involves movement. The left shoulder button controls item use, from turning on the flashlight to hitting enemies with a truncheon (always a handy thing to leave lying around a hospital!)

The story is driven by your character (identified as John Doe by the chart outside his hospital room) who explores the hospital and tries to discover why he's there and why the building is filled with monsters. Following the formula established by other traditional horror RPG's you have to fight various Boss characters to progress through the game. Back story is provided by the various files and news clippings you find distributed throughout the hospital.

Whilst the game is graphically good, and features excellent sound, it does have a number of problems. One of the most significant is with the control system. Whilst it makes good use of the DS stylus, you still end up holding the DS one handed, with your thumb controlling movement and your forefinger using the left shoulder button. This quickly puts a strain on your hand and if you play it the game for longer than an hour at a time – as most players probably will at some point – you will end up with severe cramp. This problem is less pronounced in the DS Lite but most players will still probably need to limit gameplay in order to alleviate the discomfort caused by this awkward controls . And this is where difficulty number two arrives. The game performs an autosave when you quit a session, allowing you to return to the point you left from. However, if your character is subsequently killed, the game restarts at the start of your current chapter. At one point this resulted in my having to replay over 30 minutes of the game, which was deeply frustrating.

Dementium: The Ward is ultimately most reminiscent of the horror and fantasy based RPG's that once ruled on the original Playstation and Xbox platforms. It's good to see game developers starting to create DS games for an adult audience, given that the vast majority of existing titles for the console seem to be designed for children (such as the likes of *Pokemon*, *Cooking Mama*, *Nintendogs* and *My Horse and Me*) or if not, largely consist of repackaging classic arcade games (as in *Atari Retro Hits*) or gimmicky puzzle/brain training releases. The graphics push the DS to its limits and combine with the sound to create atmospheric gameplay that will get the occasional jump out of you. Despite the poor save system, *Dementium: The Ward* is still a must have for horror fans with a DS.

Eoin Murphy

Dementium: Secret Files

Graphics: 9

Gameplay: 8

Sound: 8

Replay Value: 6

Overall Score: 7.75

Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines

(Developer – Troika) Rated 18

Platform – PC-CD ROM

“Blood? It’s your new rack of lamb, your new champagne. Blood’s your new f**ckin’ heroin!” In a typically tongue-in-cheek style, one of *Vampire*’s many characters explains to you the basics of what it means to be a vampire in Troika’s game. Here, you play a fledgling vampire in the twenty-first century. The twenty-first century, up to date with a vengeance.

Why such a grand opening? Because *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* defines the videogame vampire as powerfully as *Dracula* defines the literary one. All vampire texts, in whatever medium, are haunted by the shadow of influence cast by Stoker’s novel, and this game is no different. Indeed, it attempts, (successfully, I think) to revise Stoker’s vampire myths to authenticate and canonise its own vampire world, twenty first Century L.A. Laptops replace typewriters, email replaces the telegram, and sub-machine guns replace garlic, stakes, and the crucifix. *Vampire*’s developers, Troika, go out of their way to offer videogame players a world separate to Stoker’s, where vampires and their prey are governed by different technologies and codes of survival to those found in late Victorian writing. In the tutorial stage of the game, Jack, your incidental instructor, continues to explain how you as a vampire are to survive:

“You can still be destroyed, but...forget the books and the movies. Garlic? It’s worthless. A cross? Pfft. Shove it right up their ass! A stake? Only if it catches you in the heart.”

Vampire positions itself in a post-Anne Rice world, where all the religious weaponry that was effective in the nineteenth century is now null and void. Here’s why I think the game is so effective at setting a new standard of vampire mythology, and it’s our way into reviewing the game itself: the dialogue. The things that the characters say in this game really bring the world to life. Since *Vampire* is an Action/Role Playing hybrid, you’ll spend a lot of time getting to know your surroundings, talking to NPCs and taking a side in the epic plot that unfolds. What’s initially striking about this is the detail the game surrounds you in. There’s haunted mansions, (clearly inspired by the *Thief* games) goth clubs, graveyards, and even a Chinatown to explore. Every NPC you can interact with is extremely well-written, each one with their own distinct personality and agenda. In a medium so restrained by poor dialogue and stereotypical characters, *Vampire* is a breath of fresh air. Although you’ll quickly develop a favourite, the game introduces a truly inspired character at every turn, discarding one brilliantly written, brilliantly voiced character for an even better one. Again and again. My favourite is Gary, the Nosferatu Primogen, who in life, was a 1940’s Hollywood *noir* actor. His lines are so good they wouldn’t look out of place in well... a 1940’s Hollywood *film noir*. Here, the writing serves to make these supernatural characters believable, and its connection to popular culture and American urban living, authenticates their views on a recognisable world in which they exist secretly amongst the living.

It’s easy to get carried away with all this excellent attention to detail, but it’s only half of what makes a game great. Does *Vampire* work as well as a game as it would as a film? Well, the answer is yes and no. One thing that’s very well done is how the Role Playing elements augment but never dominate the game. You pick a vampire clan, each with different special abilities, and undergo quests set by the various characters you encounter. Each time you successfully complete a quest, you’re given points which you can spend in order to upgrade these abilities. For example, one of these abilities allows you to turn yourself invisible for a short period of time. Upgrading this ability allows you to remain invisible for

longer, and under the noses of ever more powerful and perceptive foes. Unlike many Role Playing games, where upgrading the statistics of a character seems to be the sole reward and reason for playing, *Vampire*'s stat system is a route to a much deeper level of enjoyment. You earn points in interesting ways, (such as in one quest where you exorcise a haunted house) and put them to ever more inventive uses. In one bizarre and hilarious example, you can use your powers of persuasion to convince a haughty restaurant critic to write a bad review. Victory isn't simply the killing of faceless monsters because you have a higher set of numbers than them. It's also because you have the ability to outwit or persuade your foes to do your bidding. *Vampire* is a much more realistic gaming experience than other RPGs, where these foes often use speech craft rather than brute force to scupper your chances of success. It's a feature that merges imaginative game design and character writing seamlessly, demonstrating that games can indeed compete with other mediums in telling stories, without actually forgetting that they're games, and not novels or films.

But there are some drawbacks as well. Firstly, and perhaps most superficially, the graphics aren't all that great. *Vampire*'s graphic engine is based on Valve's Source code, used in the *Half-Life 2* series. Even in 2004 when *Vampire* was released, its visuals looked rather dated. Although the engine allows for realistic facial expressions on the NPCs that you talk to, the lighting dynamics are often poor, and many of the environments in the game are sparsely decorated. *Vampire*'s atmosphere comes from its music, sound effects and period textures, rather than its surface appearance. Also, the game is incredibly buggy, where some quest events in the game fail to work the first time you encounter them, meaning you have to re-load your save game and try them again. The physics in the game are often erratic, where boxes fail to touch the floor, and thrown bodies spin endlessly in the air if their trajectory is impeded by any part of the scenery that's in their path. It seems here that Troika have a game that's just a little *too* ambitious. They've used a graphics engine which isn't really suitable for the sheer range of genres that they offer. As such, *Vampire* feels a little confused, trying its best to hold its vast genre hybridity together. It can't decide whether it's an action game, an adventure game, or a traditional RPG. Rather than blending these features seamlessly together, its quests force you to change your playing style according to its needs, breaking the immersive nature of actually being a vampire and doing things in the way you choose to yourself. For example, towards the end of the game, there's an over-emphasis on combat elements. Here, all those points you've carefully spent on linguistic and scholarship abilities are wasted and never put to use again. Why couldn't Troika have offered a non-violent solution to the game's conclusion, allowing vampire players with a specialist in speech craft to find a solution that caters for their style of play?

Despite these drawbacks, *Vampire*'s strengths keep you playing. For every combat segment that outstays its welcome, there's a brilliant dialogue exchange and plot twist to reward you with. After you've encountered another one of the game's totally convincing characters, you'll swear the trawl to get to them was worth it. The sheer depth, while confusing at times, will keep you coming back to the game time and time again. There's dozens of optional side quests with multiple solutions, and the world reacts to each vampire clan differently, ensuring that no two gaming experiences are the same. *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* is an assortment of inspired writing and ill-considered code, of atmospheric depth and poor design. But for anyone who ever wanted to see the world from the perspective of a vampire: install the patch, draw the curtains, and enter the night.

Stuart Lindsay

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines

Graphics: 7

Gameplay: 7

Sound: 9

Replay Value: 10

Average Score: 8.25