

'Edge of Nowhere' is a New Kind of Scary in Virtual Reality

By [Phil Hornshaw](#)
June 6, 2016



Sometimes video games aren't meant to empower or immerse, but for something much more primal: to scare the crap out of you. *Playboy's Fear and Loading* series peers down dark hallways and checks under gaming's bed to find the games that terrify us, and delves into how and why they work.

There's a weird issue when you play a third-person virtual reality game—one where the view hovers behind a character or over their shoulder, rather than through their eyes: you feel kind of adjacent to the action, rather than immersed in it.

For their entire history, games have had a unique ability to make players feel like controlling a digital representation of a character is more than just pushing buttons on a controller. It's why we say "I died" instead of "Lara Croft died" or "I won" instead of "Mario won."

Edge of Nowhere doesn't quite feel like that, though. Insomniac Games' "horror adventure" title is an Oculus Rift VR game, and instead of going the route of many VR experiences, putting players in a first-person perspective, it opts for the third-person. That's well-trodden territory for traditional video games on a 2D screen, but actually a bit outside the norm for VR.

Most VR horror games take advantage of the intimacy of the medium and the claustrophobia of the hardware—a thing strapped to your face—with first-person games. They're mostly about that popcorn-chucking moment of being startled by something known as the "jump scare." But not *Edge of Nowhere*.

A DIFFERENT SORT OF SCARY



At Insomniac Media Day back in April at the studio in Burbank, Calif., Insomniac devs showed off the demo for *Edge of Nowhere*. While the game is creepy in its own right, drawing deeply from the well of Lovecraftian horror, it suffered from one major issue: it wasn't really all that scary to fight the game's viscous, betentacled monsters.

That's because with a VR headset on, the role of the player is to control Victor, the game's protagonist, but also to act independently as a camera. You can look around as you move through the game's vast Antarctic wastes and shining, icy caves, leaning to peer into crevasses or turning to take in distant vistas. When you reach a "point of interest" where Victor can look more closely at, say, a monster corpse, it's like standing beside Victor, moving to get a better look at what's drawn his attention.

But being beside Victor or independently being able to look around as you follow the action slightly behind him has the strange effect of putting a wall between "him" and "you." He gets attacked by monsters and the scene can take on a disaffected "oh, that's unfortunate" kind of feeling, unlike the immediacy first-person games have in tricking you into feeling like you are the character in the situation.

For Brian Algeier, Insomniac's creative director on *Edge of Nowhere*, that's not so much a problem as simply a symptom of the type of horror the developers are attempting to create.

"I tend to be a little more weak-hearted in terms of horror," Algeier told me during an interview. "I'm not a fan of games that try to scare me out of my wits every 20 feet. So that's why we're calling this a 'horror adventure.' There is a certain focus on building tension, but at the same time we like to embrace the more adventuresome aspect. A third-person game, you get to do a lot of climbing, jumping and more traversal and movement type abilities, where that's harder to pull off in a first-person-style game."

The "adventure" part might be the bigger chunk of the *Edge of Nowhere* experience. Actually playing as Victor involves a lot of climbing ice walls and smacking enemies with pickaxes or tearing them apart with shotgun blasts. If you think of something like the recent *Tomb Raider* games, you're getting it.

The horror part comes from *Edge of Nowhere's* inspirations—specifically the horror stories of H.P. Lovecraft. The developers have talked many times about how *Edge of Nowhere* draws a lot from Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, and Algeier said that's true as much for the cosmic, unknowable horror part of the story, in which an expedition discovers an ancient city inhabited by impossible creatures, as for the "exploring Antarctica" part.

VIRTUAL REALITY, ACTUAL NAUSEA



The third-person approach also solved one of virtual reality's major discomfort issues, allowing players to move around in the game without getting sick from doing so. Too much speedy movement or panning the camera around can make a lot of players motion sick.

"The thing is, we wanted to be able to explore Antarctica and travel through the mountains," Algeier said. "Locomotion is one of the bigger challenges with VR and creating comfort. And so anytime you go first-person in VR, you run into the issue of how does the player turn and move around. And unless it's like a standing demo and you're not walking from room to room, or you're like warping along, it's hard to do smooth traversal."

"So we're exploring kind of a different kind of horror, where you have more body awareness of the hero, and you can empathize and relate to what the character's going through much like you would with a film. In a horror film, you see a character—a spider will, like, crawl across them and you'll have the same creepy feeling of a spider crawling on you. It is more of a vicarious and indirect way, but we're finding that it can be just as terrifying and chilling."

Across its four- to six-hour runtime, *Edge of Nowhere* spans both exploration and combat with impossible creatures inspired by Lovecraft, as well as movies like John Carpenter's *The Thing* and the novella on which it's based, John W. Campbell's *Who Goes There?*. Players will fight monsters and sneak past them when possible, distracting them with rocks and leading them into traps to escape death. But all that time spent dealing with awful things will take a toll on Victor's psyche, and it's there that *Edge of Nowhere's* VR capabilities really start to shine.

The demo ended with players finding themselves entering an Antarctic cave that morphs to become a university lecture hall from Victor's past, implying that, like in all Lovecraft fiction, Victor's sanity is crumbling under the weight of what he's experiencing. While VR creates issues for Insomniac to deal with in terms of gameplay, camera use and moment-to-moment scares, it also allows developers to drop players into this world along with Victor, and to play with their perceptions of what's happening along with his. Those moments cut to a first-person perspective to put players in Victor's head, taking advantage of VR's ability to make players feel present in the game space.

PRESENTATION AND PERCEPTION



While there are monsters and sneaking around and moments in which *Edge of Nowhere* will mess with your perceptions, in general the game's approach to horror is psychological. You might not freak out the same at *Edge of Nowhere* and its third-person perspective as you would playing something like *Alien: Isolation* and feeling like you are the character getting stabbed through the chest by a xenomorph, but that's not the kind of fear Insomniac wants to achieve, Algeier said.

"I was fairly new to H.P. Lovecraft [when we started working on *Edge of Nowhere*], so I really dived in and read *At the Mountains of Madness*, *Shadow Over Innsmouth*, *Call of Cthulhu*. I was just really taken with the sense of the unknown, that more psychological fear that we innately have," Algeier explained. "When we don't know if something is beyond the corner, we tend to build up our feelings of fear. We tend to be our own worst enemy, psychologically. So I thought that was kind of a cool aspect to explore with *Edge of Nowhere*."

Psychological horror is tough on its own, but virtual reality is such a new medium that *Edge of Nowhere*—which really isn't too different from lots of modern video games, horror or not—becomes something of an experiment. Algeier said Insomniac found some of the old ways of presenting stuff in games just didn't work in VR. With the distance between the player and the scene as it was unfolding, some things were just not as affecting, and developers had to come up with new ideas to get *Edge of Nowhere's* creepiness across.

"We had this moment where you discover a lot of expedition bodies, and we thought, 'Oh, we're just going to put them all on the floor, all scattered around, blood everywhere,'" he explained. "And we played it and it didn't have that same impact, because you are in this follow camera, and Victor might see things up close—we could have done POI (point of interest) moment, but it just really didn't resonate. So we thought, well, what if we somehow hung them above you? And it ended up creating this really eerie, like, what the hell happened to these characters? It creates more of a question and mystery. That's a good example of where constraints and restrictions have real benefits."

In a young virtual reality market that's already inundated with dark, first-person horror games that revel in freaking players out, Insomniac's approach to *Edge of Nowhere* is decidedly different—maybe even risky. But succeed or fail, as Insomniac cuts its path through the Antarctic wastes it's also leaving a trail for other developers as they experiment in VR.

Edge of Nowhere is out on the Oculus store today.

Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel and The Space Hero's Guide to Glory. He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.

RELATED: Pam Battles Dark Souls 3's Toughest Enemies: Other Players



VIDEO GAMES GAMING FEAR AND LOADING ENTERTAINMENT BEST OF PLAYBOY GAMING


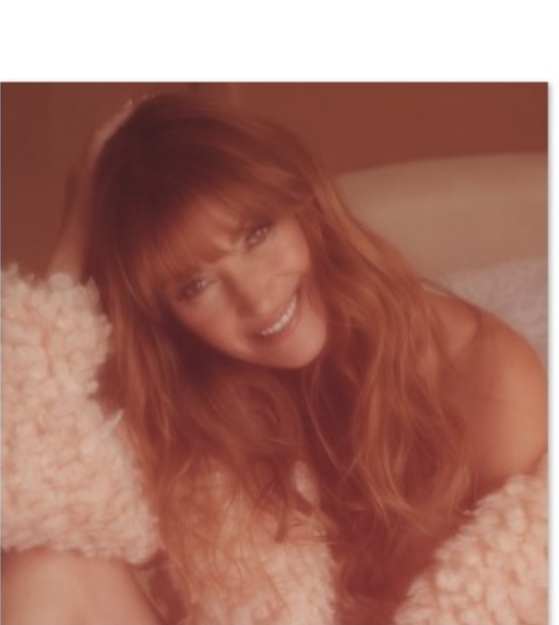
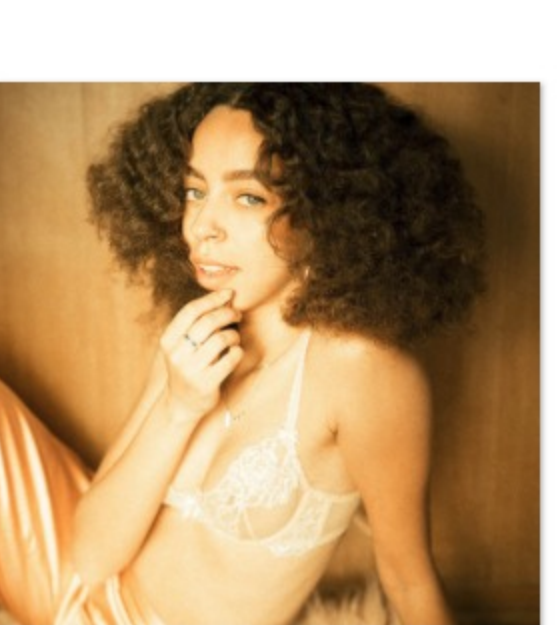
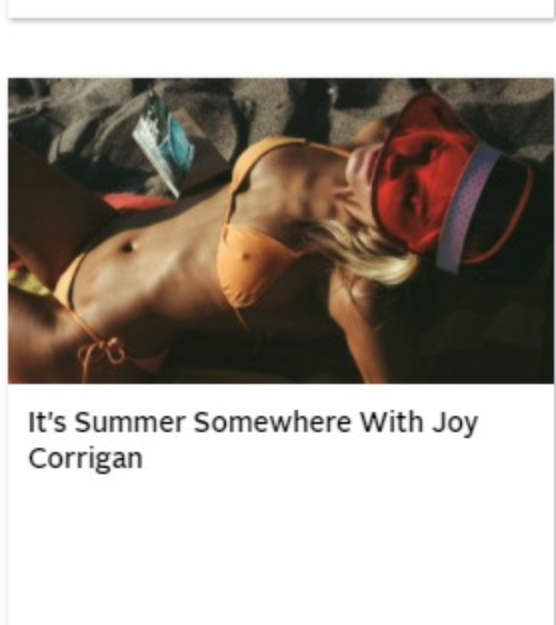
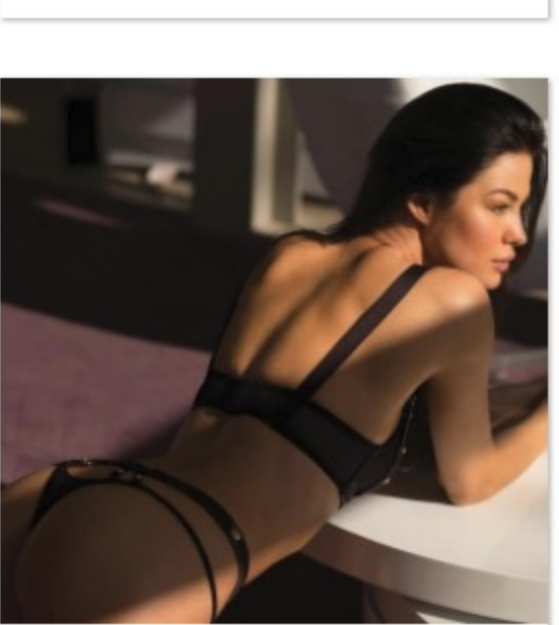





Conversation

Be the first to comment...

Terms - Privacy Add Spam.M to your site

Recommended For You

 The Playboy Interview: Stephen Hawking	 Becoming Jane: The Iconic Actress is Heating Up Television Once Again (and She Knows It)	 From 'Altered Carbon' Star to Sex-Pop Goddess: Halle Berry is Ready to Break Out
 It's Summer Somewhere With Joey Corrigan	 This Week in Sex: Meet March 2018 Playmate Jenny Watwood	 Why She Calls You Daddy During Sex

Magazine  SUBSCRIBE	NSFW  SUBSCRIBE	Content Entertainment Off Hours Bunnies Sex & Culture Heritage Video Advertise With Us About Us Privacy Policy Sitemap Terms of Use	Sites Playmates.com Download the App Playboy Shop Playboy Archive Playboy Studios Playboy Enterprises Playboy Careers Playboy Events Playmate Promotions Playboy Radio Playboy TV Magazine Customer Support
---	---	---	--