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## Frostpunk is the Harshest City Builder You'll Ever Play

By Samuel Horti on 13 Apr 2018 at 1:17PM

One of your citizens is refusing to part ways with his frostbitten left leg. If your medics leave him alone then gangrene will kill him within days, adding another body to the growing pile dumped in a snowdrift on the edge of town. If you forcibly restrain him and amputate you'll save his life, but he won't be able to work, making him a burden on your already-strained resources. So: what do you do?

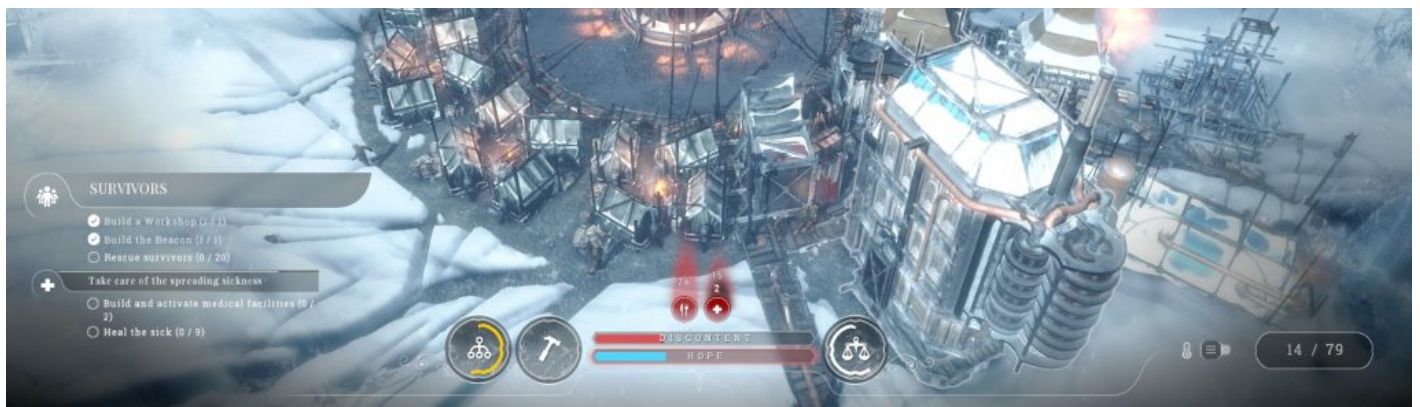
These are the kinds of bleak choices you can expect in *Frostpunk*, a city builder about surviving an apocalyptic snowstorm in the 19th century. Your job is to keep a group of survivors safe by building a city around a generator that gives off barely enough heat to shelter your citizens from the  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  cold. In my preview build (the game releases 24th April on PC) I gathered wood, steel and coal from the scant resource piles around the generator and turned them into roads, tents, hunting huts, food halls, and resource labs that could unlock new steampunk technologies, all the while battling against the blizzards.



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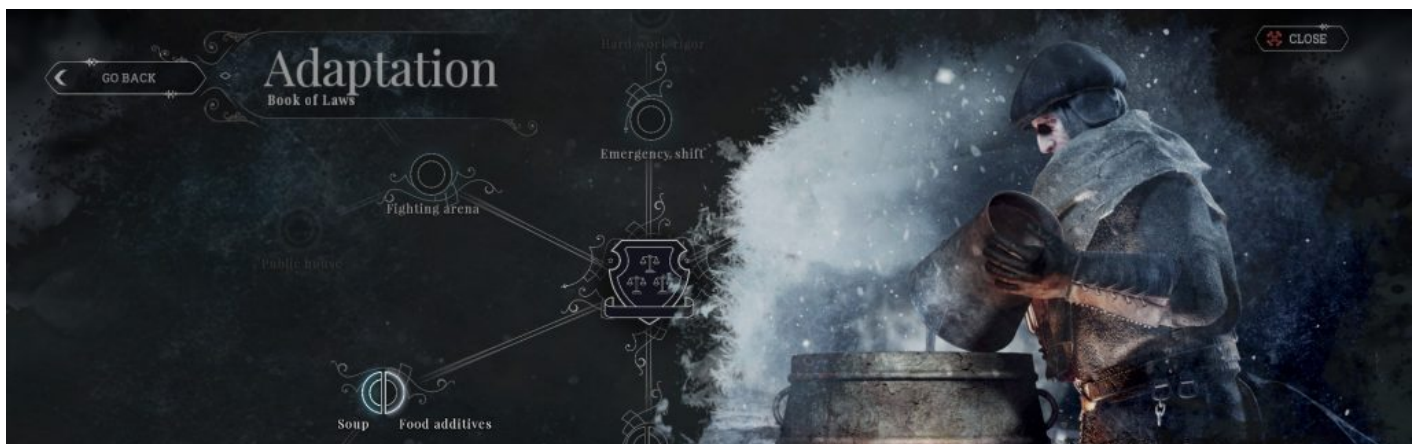


The further away from your generator you build your growing city, the more you risk people succumbing to the cold, and some buildings—such as the medical centre—won't function if they're too chilly. In cold snaps, even tents pressed up against the generator will turn to ice, so you have to research heat upgrades and smaller steam hubs to keep buildings warm.

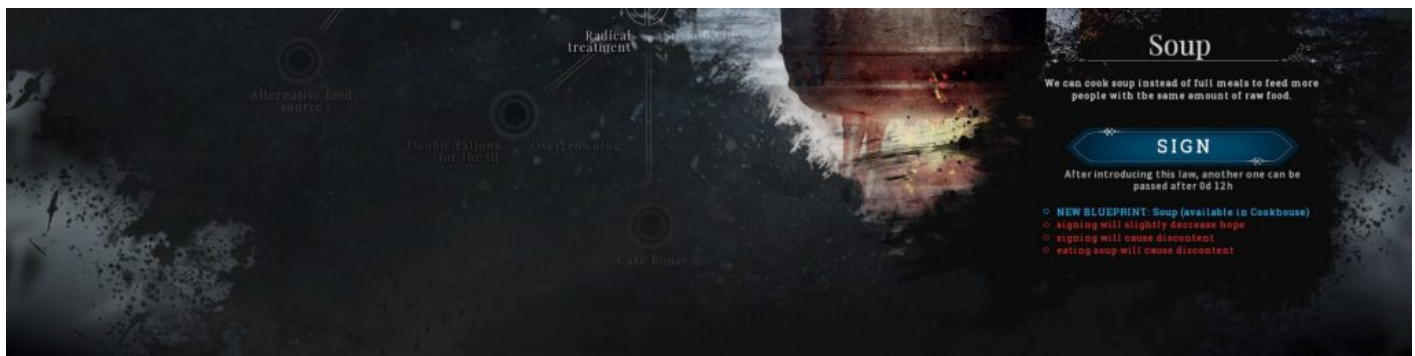


I like how consistently grim Frostpunk is. Everything about it, from the sparse writing to the ice curling over the UI, is oppressive. Even something as simple as sending workers to gather resources feels like a trade-off. If I stop a group harvesting crates and send them to hunt for food then fewer people will go hungry, but I won't have enough wood to build new homes, leaving some people to freeze to death in the wind. If I need more coal to stop my generator spluttering out, I might have to remove some hunters from their post, which means others will starve.

Your greatest weapon against the elements is your Book of Laws, in which you sign new policies to change how your citizens behave. It functions like a skill tree, with branches that open up as you decide which laws to enact. Some offer passive benefits, like the sick healing more quickly, but most are last resorts that you sign to stave off disaster. Halfway through my ten-day playthrough, my food runs dangerously low, so I start serving meals bulked up with sawdust. By that point, I'd already introduced child labour and enforced round-the-clock work shifts because I was running low on resources.







There's a limit to how much your citizens can take, shown via their 'Hope' and 'Discontent' meters. People are angry about finding sawdust in their soup, so I try to placate them by approving the construction of a pub where they can forget their sorry lives. But even that has downsides: it will have to be staffed by two workers, which means I'll collect less resources elsewhere.

The policies are imaginative—you can harvest organs from dead bodies and use them as fertiliser to grow food, for example—and developer 11 Bit Studios promises they'll get even more complex in the late-game, where you'll be able to set up neighbourhood watch towers to keep the peace or crack down on troublemakers with an iron fist.

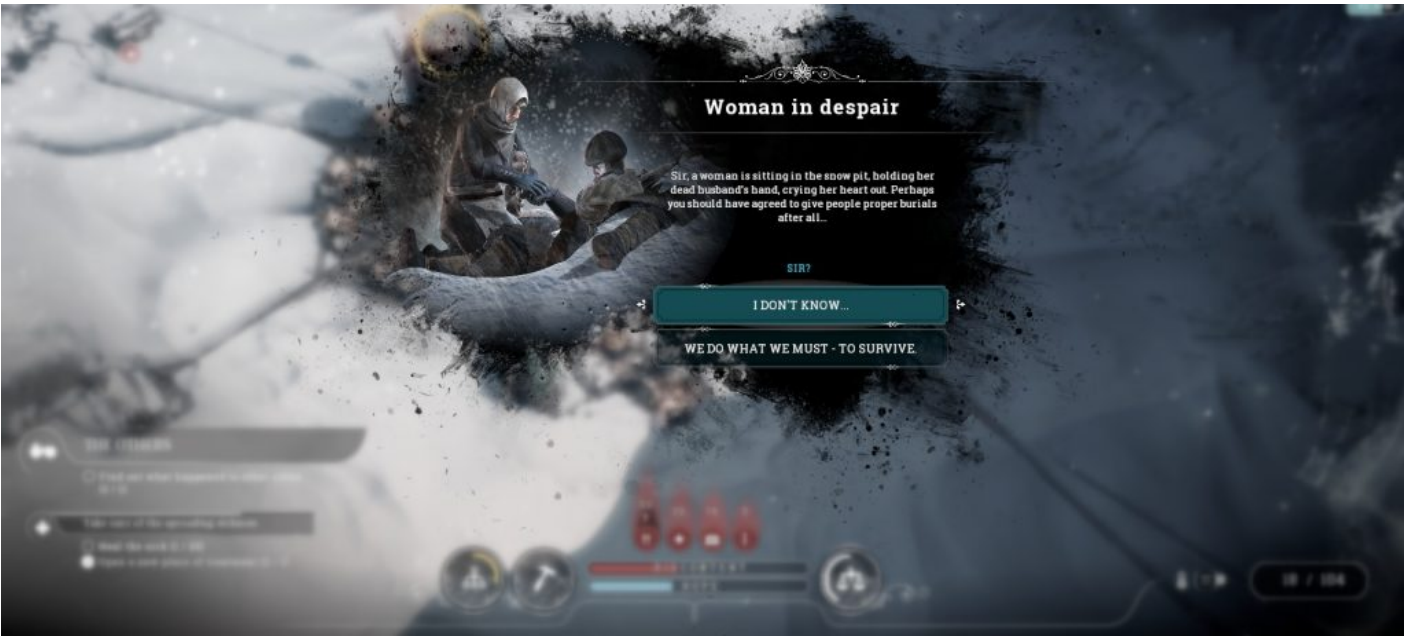
I'm also intrigued to find out what happens outside of my city. If you zoom out you'll reach an overworld map, and you can send teams of scouts off into the snow to explore nearby landmarks and search for signs of life. They'll find stacks of resources that they can carry home, and stumble across groups of survivors that they can escort back to your city. If you prefer, you can just point the survivors in the right direction and give them a nudge, but without an escort some won't last the journey. The resource piles and the extra bodies are welcome — more than once, my returning scouts saved me from the brink by dumping valuable wood, metal and food into my city's depleted reserves.



This overworld map feels like it will be the setting for the game's overarching story. My objective in the demo is to find another city, and it ends when I come across the broken remains of a previous settlement, its inhabitants frozen in the snow. I have no doubt that, at some point in the full game, I'll come across another purring generator surrounded by a circle of tents, which will throw up a series of decisions to make.

*Frostpunk's* bleakness feels like more than just a thematic choice — it feels like an attempt to solve the age-old problem of city builders making citizens feel like numbers on a spreadsheet rather than actual humans. After I approve child labour, it's not long before a young boy collapses in front of his friends, and the game shows me a portrait of his limp body being carried out of town. These mini-stories, accompanied by pretty artwork, both demonstrate the consequences of your actions and help frame difficult decisions. Instead of simply asking you whether you want to build a cemetery, *Frostpunk* shows you a woman that's sitting in a snow pit holding her dead husband's hand and weeping. "Perhaps you should have agreed to give people proper burials," it suggests.





*Frostpunk* is not going to be the city builder that makes you care about the lives of the people you're controlling, and the story-driven approach doesn't completely remove the feeling that you're playing a numbers game. But by focusing on the lives of individuals, it makes you think a little harder about the decisions you make.

Oh, that guy with the frostbitten left leg? I ordered it chopped off. If you turn a blind eye to the child labour stuff, I'm all heart.

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Samuel Horti

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-  **Barkshake** · 3 days ago  
Visually it really looks awesome, and gameplay-wise seems to be a cross between a city builder and Darkest Dungeon. Sign me up!  
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-  **suaviant** · 13 hours ago  
Wow! Sounds like fun! I can't wait to make tough decisions in a miserable frozen wasteland and eat shit either way! This is truly why the medium was invented (^^)  
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-  **AmorousBadger** · a day ago  
Basic medical ethics says 'he's got mental capacity, he understand the consequences, them's the breaks.'  
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-  **BlargleWargle** · 2 days ago  
The visual of having that massive furnace tower in the howling wind is downright AMAZING. I cannot wait for this, it sounds like it'll be really difficult to get through and that has me giddy.  
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-  **Fish** · 2 days ago  
Amputee does not equal totally useless. Surely there would be some viable job. Just giving up on the injured like that is certainly one way to obliterate morale and compound the overall stress of a survival situation. It doesn't create loyalty exactly either which is crucial.  
  
Brutal decisions my arse.  
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-  **Samuel Horti** → Fish · 2 days ago  
You can later create viable jobs for amputees, but it wasn't within the scope of the demo  
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-  **Fish** → Samuel Horti · 2 days ago  
Later create jobs?... I get it but at the same time it still doesn't sit right with me as a game mechanic. Something basic like peeling spuds surely? Increased food prep or whatever but loss in productivity and efficiency elsewhere.  
^ | v · Reply · Share ›
-  **Ashleigh Creed** · 3 days ago  
I would simply have his leg chopped off and make a prosthetic leg for him so that he can walk again. If they can build a state of the art 19th Century generator to survive an apocalypse, I'm sure proto-prosthetics aren't impossible.  
  
This is one of many nice surprises this April and May. Between this, Battletech, Total War Britannia, Pillars of Eternity, and God of War 4, it's not just a bunch of games that may or may not be fun - these titles have me genuinely excited.  
  
I've always been a huge Mechwarrior and Battletech fan and it'll be nice to have a Mech strategy game again. Pillars is meant to be phenomenal with the new Ship you can sail, and I LOVE the idea of a 19th Century post apocalyptic strategy game where everything is out to get you. I do hope they keep the survivor mechanics tight, so that I can remember the names of my citizens and actually know what they're like and what they're good at. Just having a bunch of nameless peons is no fun at all. I want to feel genuine remorse when I send someone off to die.  
  
Also, Jurassic Park Evolution is shaping up to be a killer strategy title and one that the franchise has long needed. Between the strong tech tree, research and advancement, Park building mechanics, and being able to control rangers in ground vehicles and helicopters to shoot at escaped or sick dinos... this game has me over the moon. (To be clear, you shoot Tranq darts at escapees and Antibiotic darts at sick dinos)

I've just felt that a lot of games in recent years have been too similar and not nearly as exciting as when you first played their predecessors, back when they introduced new gameplay mechanics that would blow everyone away. Plus, God of War taking on a

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**Martin Crutchley** → Ashleigh Creed · 3 hours ago

Arn't you concerned that JPE will be a console title being ported to PC rather than vice-versa? It'll also have no workshop support (which is almost certainly a requirement for any successful strategy title today) and seems to be incredibly limited in regards to buildable assets. I was as hyped as you are but the gameplay videos have got me incredibly worried that instead of just creating a creative sandbox like Planet Coaster they've gone for an action/strategy light title that masters neither genre.

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**dryrain** · 3 days ago

In answer to your question leave him to die. If he is not a productive member of society then he is a burden easy decision.

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**Samuel Horti** → dryrain · 3 days ago

Maybe, but more dead = potentially lower hope among population + need to bury body, which could have further complications...

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**Ben Hillman** → Samuel Horti · a day ago

Does it even come down to you making a moral choice or a games mechanical one at that level of granularity? They name and detail everyone to try and get you to empathise with the push and pull of your responsibilities to the whole, but after a few times of it happening you're just weighing two different abstract material costs. I know that's kind of the point where these games steadily turn you into a unempathetic authority, but I hope later down the tech tree that art imitates life, and curing problems like this becomes trivial to really heighten the senseless tragedy of it all.

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**Samuel Horti** → Ben Hillman · a day ago

It's a bit of both, really. As I said in piece, you don't end up caring for your citizens, but the framing of the questions makes you at least think about what impact your decisions will have on an individual level.

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**themanlikedave** · 3 days ago

HA, no question, his choice, he keeps the leg and dies. Dont feel bad, he was a team player, you should salute him.

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**FRISH** → themanlikedave · 8 hours ago

Yeah I don't really get the dilemma. Firstly there's the fact that they're just virtual so the burden they bring is more important. Otherwise why should your belief to keep them alive override their wishes? Seems quite arrogant to me.

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