



Batman: Arkham Asylum

Lauded on release, the passage of time
reveals a curious lack of character

BY SAMUEL HORTI

Developer Rocksteady Studios **Publisher** Eidos Interactive **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2009

The thing that defines our caped hero, he posits in 2005 film *Batman Begins*, is “not who I am underneath, but what I do”. If you judge 2009’s *Batman: Arkham Asylum* on those skin-deep terms, it was an unequivocal success. Its fluid fistfights kickstarted a new brand of thirdperson action, and you’ll still hear developers talking about “Arkham-style” combat today. It reversed the fortunes of Batman games, which up to that point were mostly forgettable tie-ins. And it transformed Rocksteady, then an unknown team with a single game under its belt — the obscure *Urban Chaos: Riot Response* — into one of the UK’s hottest studios.

Judging *Arkham Asylum* by what’s ‘underneath’, however, is trickier. It pits Batman against a host of his arch-enemies, including the Joker, Harley Quinn and the Scarecrow, but reveals nothing new about these characters. It toys with deeper themes of grief and trauma, but fails to explore them. In other words, Rocksteady doesn’t appear to say much about Batman other than: here’s how you make a good Batman game. That was fine at the time, but three other good Batman games later — *Arkham City*, *Arkham Origins* and *Arkham Knight* — *Asylum* looks less like a revolution. The deeper you dig, the more it looks like a missed opportunity.

Combat remains the highlight, and it’s not hard to see why so many games, from *Shadow Of Mordor* to *Sleeping Dogs*, took cues from it. *Arkham Asylum* wasn’t the first brawler to let you bounce from enemy to enemy (*Spider-Man 2* did it five years earlier), but its system was the best, and remained the best until Rocksteady iterated on it. Upper cuts, knee strikes and flying elbows blend without a hitch, and no matter how late you press the counter button, Batman’s body is always in a natural position to catch an enemy’s fist. It’s wizardry.

Initially, *Arkham Asylum*’s combat was designed as a rhythm action minigame, as senior gameplay programmer Paul Denning described for GamesRadar+ in 2009. “Batman would fight... in time with music,” he said. “As the camera would cut, a new guy

would come in and you’d have to punch him on the beat to connect or you’d end up getting hit. If you had two guys running at you, you’d have to branch off into another piece of music that would seamlessly blend into a combo attack.” Those roots show through: the challenge isn’t in directing Batman to the next enemy, but in timing his attacks to build up a combo meter, pressing the button as the previous attack lands.

It’s not perfect. For example, you can’t cancel finishing moves on downed enemies, and those moves are interrupted if you’re hit, killing your momentum. But if you chain a few punches together, Batman begins to charge and flip between enemies with grace, as well as a certain inevitability. He’s a train, and they’re caught in his lights. The crack, crack, crack of his attacks make you feel like you’re reading a comic panel by panel, just without the whams and kapows.

Batman can strike equally as well from the shadows during stealth sections, dropping down from a gargyle to string up an unsuspecting enemy, or detonating sticky paste to blow up a weakened wall, crushing goons with the rubble. Using the detective mode overlay, which shows enemy skeletons through walls, you can track movement patterns and plan your approach, prioritising gunmen, who will kill you in seconds if they see you. Once you start picking them off, you can sense the dread in the room. Enemies cast glances over their shoulder and begin to patrol in pairs, inching around corners and covering each others’ backs. “Wake up, do you hear me? Wake up,” they’ll scream at their unconscious squad mates in a panic.

The world itself holds up well, and it’s full of details that create a sense of place. The showers in the penitentiary building are coated with grime. Metal grates cover the windows and cracked, faded tiles line the floor, their pattern broken only by drains. An extractor fan the size of a jet engine hangs from the ceiling. You can imagine the inmates filing in under guards’ suspicious eyes, showering, and filing out again through the white plastic curtains that separate this room from the main facility.

But it’s neither the detailed world nor the combat that provide *Arkham Asylum*’s best moments. Instead, these arrive on ►

the rare occasion Rocksteady delves into Batman's psyche. Two sequences stand out: about halfway through, after leaving the library in Arkham Mansion, Batman walks a seemingly endless corridor and rain falls from the rafters, the voices of his parents echoing off the walls. With every clap of lightning, the rain worsens. We hear a man accosting the couple, his voice demonic, distorted by Batman's memory. An argument. A struggle. Two shots ring out. Batman is no longer in a corridor but an alleyway. When he looks down he sees his parents' bodies, his mother slumped across his father's stomach. His unnaturally stiff posture shatters, and he folds to his knees. Another flash, and we're controlling the newly orphaned young boy, Bruce Wayne.

Later, *Arkham Asylum* fakes a crash. An error message appears, the screen fades to



black, should, be telling. In the corridor sequence, young Bruce talks to a policeman in the aftermath of the shooting. "Why did he do it, officer?" he asks. "Why?" It, like the other important questions, goes unanswered, and you're left longing for a deeper exploration that never arrives.

That tease is made more frustrating by the fact the comic that most heavily inspired the game, 1989's *Arkham Asylum*:

Ten years on, *Arkham Asylum* remains a looker. While characters lack detail, the wider world looks as good as many modern games

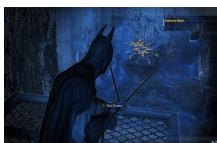
THESE SUBVERSIVE MOMENTS BEGIN TO ASK PROFOUND QUESTIONS ABOUT BATMAN. JUST HOW DAMAGED IS HE?

black, and the game's opening repeats. But this time, the roles of hero and villain are reversed: it's the Joker bringing Batman to the asylum, strapping him to a restraining board and wheeling him through the lobby. "We really should feel sorry for him," says the Scarecrow, examining Batman. "He never fully got over his parents' death. It left him quite insane." Later in the sequence, when Batman fights a giant Scarecrow, the stand-in warden claims Batman is "a classic case of split personality".

These subversive moments begin to ask profound questions about Batman. Just how damaged is he? What, if anything, will bring him peace? Is he that different to the supervillains he spends his life chasing? But they're just teases: a taste of the kind of story *Arkham Asylum* could, and arguably

A Serious House On Serious Earth, remains one of the most thorough examinations of Batman's character you can read. Long-time nemesis the Mad Hatter even suggests the entire story is taking place in the caped crusader's head. "Arkham is a looking glass," he says, "and we are you." It's a dream of Batman's creation, his enemies an exploration of his own trauma. Batman's epilogue in the comic reads: "Mommy's dead. Daddy's dead. Brucie's dead. I shall become a bat."

Rocksteady clearly picked up on those themes, but was happy to cast them aside after a glance. From the game crash onwards, *Arkham Asylum* is a series of unimaginative boss battles. Sneaking over wooden boards in Killer Croc's underground lair and spamming batarangs whenever he appears feels repetitive. So does the fight with



Detective mode lets you spot breakable walls and trace power lines from locked doors. Hack the circuit box and you're in



ARKHAM ANATOMY

Arkham Asylum's commercial success convinced Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment to buy a majority stake in Rocksteady, and the studio has made Batman games ever since. Arkham City was set across an open world five times the size of Asylum, and introduced Catwoman as a playable character. Arkham Origins was a prequel that added multiplayer, while 2015's Arkham Knight brought in the Batmobile, and put an emphasis on story. It was billed as the series' finale, but Warner Bros teased a new Batman game last year, and rumours arose that it would be called Batman: Arkham Legacy. Rocksteady has remained silent on its next game since the release of Arkham Knight.

When you face the Scarecrow, *Arkham Asylum* turns into a stealthy sidescroller in a dreamlike world. If the Scarecrow sees you, you're instantly dead



Batman's miniboss fights all roughly follow the same formula: get the big boss to charge you, dodge out the way, and watch them crash into the wall

Poison Ivy. The Joker's decision to inject her with Titan, a chemical that turns people into monsters, has transformed Arkham Asylum, filling previously explored corridors with snaking plants and pink buds that fire glowing orbs. But when you face her, it's an anticlimax: you simply win by dodge rolling and — once again — spamming batarangs.

The Joker, the big climax, is the most disappointing of all. When Batman confronts him, the Joker aims a dart of Titan at Commissioner Gordon, who's suspended from the ceiling by ropes. The Joker's plan is to make Batman battle a monster version of his own friend. It's a tantalising prospect not just for the villain, but for the audience, too. Such a fight would place emotional strain on Batman, and perhaps let us examine those wounds we merely glimpsed earlier. Instead, Batman jumps in front of the dart, the Joker

shoots another at himself, and the finale is condemned to be a formulaic fight against a muscular brute, who could be anyone save for his wide smile and green mohawk.

At the time, critics and fans were generous in forgiving these late-game sins. They were blips in an otherwise transformative game. But that analysis only holds up if you take each element of *Arkham Asylum* — combat, stealth, setting — on its own merits, and ignore the lack of themes tying them together. You could argue the same for the sequel, *Arkham City*. It was better than *Asylum* in almost every way, but it too failed to advance our understanding of Batman, the mask, or of Bruce Wayne, the man. It wasn't until 2015's *Arkham Knight* that Rocksteady began to say anything new about our gruff hero. If the series had started on a different, character-first note, we can only imagine the heights it would've reached.

If this criticism feels harsh, that's only because of the lavish praise heaped on *Arkham Asylum* at the time. It won numerous game of the year awards, including Best Game at the 2010 BAFTAs. Nobody would argue it didn't deserve it — just that its failings, as seen ten years later, highlight how far our expectations for story have come. In 2008's *The Dark Knight*, Harvey Dent, aka Two-Face, tells Batman that “you either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain”. *Arkham Asylum* is certainly no villain, but history has shown that it's perhaps not the hero we thought. ■