

GM Review

The Final Verdict!

The bosses are grotesque. This one chases you, grabs you with one hand, and bisects you with a circular saw.

DARKITECTURE

Wherever you go, it's all creepy

You start in small-town America, but soon you've seen a deadly theatre, catacombs, a nature reserve, a sinister laboratory, and a flaming cathedral.



Format PS4 (reviewed), XO, PC **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Tango Gameworks **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

THE EVIL WITHIN 2

Throws a bucket of guts at the wall, and most of it sticks

Like an overexcited chef with a twisted mind, before you've had a chance to finish your first serving of horror Tango Gameworks whisks your plate away, replacing it with another, gorier course – and then another a minute later. And while its narrative isn't quite strong enough to tie all of that together neatly, most of what it serves up tastes damned good. (Just don't ask what kind of meat you're eating.)

The first game's hero, Sebastian Castellanos, is forced back into action when he discovers his daughter Lily – who he thought died in a fire years before – is alive. A shady organisation

called Mobius faked her death and is using her mind to power STEM, a machine that allows people to plug into a nightmare-scape. But Lily has gone missing inside the virtual world, and it's falling apart as a result. Mobius needs Sebastian to go and find her so it can salvage STEM, and for Sebastian it's a chance to save his daughter.

You follow the trail of breadcrumbs Lily leaves behind, shooting, stabbing, and sneaking past the corrupted citizens of this formerly idyllic world and battling bosses at regular intervals. It's structured as a few small open-world hubs connected by more scripted sequences. In the open-world bits you can charge after the next breadcrumb or take on side quests, which will reward you with ammo, health kits, and crafting materials.

Resources are tight, so it's worth stepping off the main path. Exploring side areas will reveal unique stories, too; at one point we sneak through an abandoned hospital wing past a giggling ghost that can pass through walls.

The spice of strife

Away from the hubs the game never lets you sit still, throwing all manner of mechanics, environments, and boss fights your way. We fight flaming enemies in catacombs, solve a puzzle by putting a necklace on a mannequin, dodge laser beams so that we can slash works of art with our knife, and defeat a boss that teleports around the map and takes photos that freeze us in slow motion. There's far too much to describe it all here, but we're constantly, and pleasantly, surprised by the directions the game takes. Most of the settings look fantastic, too – while the graphics are nothing special technically, each area has a unique, consistent style.

Given all this variety you might think The Evil Within 2 is more of an

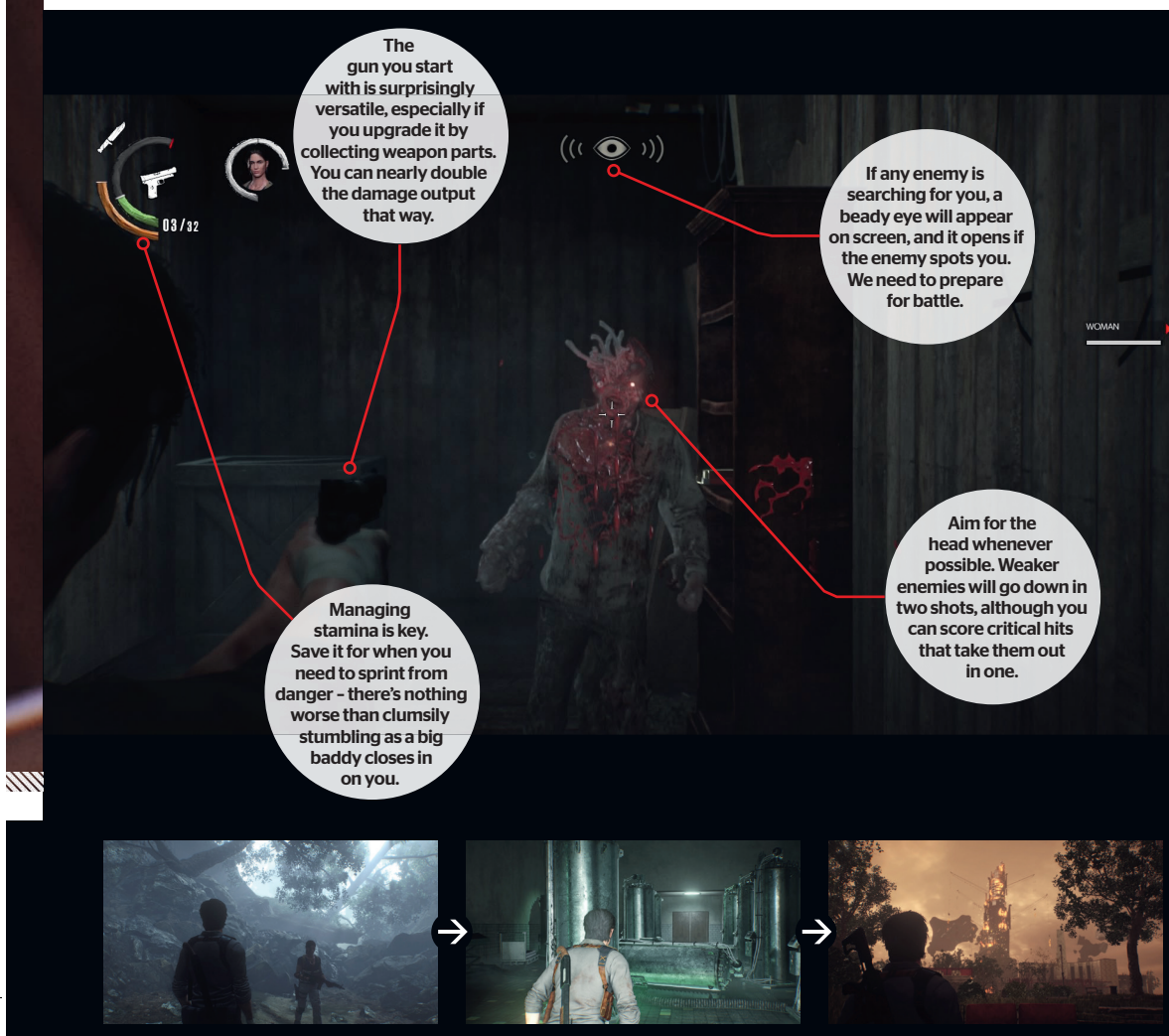
WELCOME TO THE GUN SHOW

Crafting is essential

Ammunition is in short supply in the surreal, STEM-built world of Union. This sequel features a new crafting mechanic, however, so you're able to make your own from the materials you find in the world.

Of all the things you can make, gunpowder is the biggie: you can convert it straight to bullets for your handgun or shotgun, and it's used in virtually every other recipe too. You can make ammo on the fly, but it's best to find a safe house that has a workbench, because crafting there costs fewer resources. Our advice? Grab absolutely everything you see, from fuses to bent metal pipes, because it's all going to be useful for something. Oh, and look out for glowing plants – their herbs make medical kits. You *will* need those.

“WE’RE CONSTANTLY, AND PLEASANTLY, SURPRISED BY THE DIRECTIONS THE GAME TAKES”



action-adventure game than a horror title, and we're tempted to agree. Yes, there are slower, atmospheric segments, and some of the dingy corridors and piercing screams genuinely make the hairs on the back of our neck stand up. But most of the time we aren't dreading rounding the next corner, we actively want to take a peek just to see what the game will throw at us next.

None of the scripted segments would work if the combat was bad, but it holds up well. Enemy AI is basic (your foes will retread the same routes over and over), but good enough to make sneaking up and stabbing them in the back fun. When it all goes wrong you've got an arsenal that continuously expands, from a pistol to our favourite, a crossbow. There are numerous types of bolts to fire: one electrifies puddles of water and frazzles enemies, while the smoke bolt gets us out of countless sticky situations.

The over-the-shoulder shooting feels satisfying, especially when you hit an enemy's weak spot. The Lost, the main enemy type (think zombies that can sprint), will go down in two headshots — the first splits open their skull to reveal flailing tendrils, the second turns everything above their neck into a red mist. The weapon variety means you're never short of options, and you can use the environment, for example kicking over petrol barrels and shooting the oil

that drips out. The combat's only weak when enemies are up close: because of the way the camera works it's nigh-impossible to hit anything that's right up in your face, even if the aiming reticule is pointing between their eyes. It feels unfair when you die because of it.

And you will be dying a lot in The Evil Within 2, because it's fiendishly difficult. The camera is deliberately slow to swivel, and reload times are long. The imaginative bosses (fighting the masked flamethrower was a particular highlight) hit hard and offer a real challenge, even when you're doing exactly what the game wants you to do. We only beat a buzzsaw-wielding corpse amalgam because of the convenient tripwires set up nearby, and even then it takes us seven goes. Bosses highlight just how gory the game is, too. In one, a shambling monster made of corpses will grab you and vomit green goo into your mouth until you go limp. In another, Sebastian is pinned down by a spiky-limbed foe and stabbed repeatedly in the head.

So, you've got tough boss battles, impressive environments and solid combat. What ties it together? Two strands just about manage to keep things coherent: one, Sebastian's quest to find his daughter, and two, an internal power struggle between Mobius operatives for control of STEM. We never become fully invested in the Mobius part, though,

which is essentially a parade of vaguely interesting bad guys.

Daddy issues

Sebastian's search for Lily is far more relatable, but again only half draws you in. A parent's search for their child is a refreshingly simple story thread that provides an excuse to keep the game rumbling forward, but we see too little of past interactions between Sebastian and his daughter to really care. And it doesn't help that the writing is predictable and voice acting laboured, landing halfway between ultra-serious and B-movie bad.

The pacing, too, is a little off. We like how the game eases you in with an open-world section before throwing you into the action. But towards the end of the game we're losing interest, partly because of the story, partly because it simply becomes a series of boss battles. We would've liked to have seen some of the mid-game variety nearer the finale.

However, overall The Evil Within 2 impressed us. None of its individual elements are spectacular, but its core systems are solid, and we're constantly left wondering which environment the game will show us next. Fans of the first game should tuck in, as should anyone who is looking for a more action-packed route into the survival horror genre (and can stomach the sight of a partially opened skull). ■

GM LOVES...

- ✓ The explosively gory combat is satisfying throughout.
- ✓ There's a real variety to the game's environments.
- ✓ The pace is breakneck - you're constantly rushing onwards.

GM HATES...

- ✗ The story tying it all together is a little mediocre.

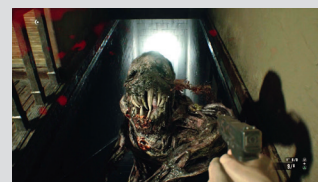
Better than...



The Evil Within

The sequel is not quite as focused as the first game, but it's more ambitious, more fun, and ships with far fewer technical problems.

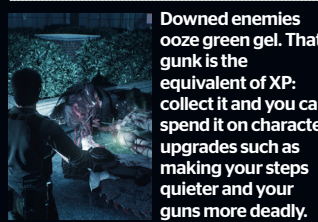
Worse than...



Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

A tense horror romp in a beautifully designed house. Nail-biting from start to end, with lots of harrowing moments.

i NEED TO KNOW



Downed enemies ooze green gel. That gunk is the equivalent of XP: collect it and you can spend it on character upgrades such as making your steps quieter and your guns more deadly.

GM JUDGEMENT

77%



An ambitious and relentless horror adventure that keeps coming up with startling new ideas.
Samuel Horti