



LIFEBAR - GAME OF THE YEAR 2023

**ALAN WAKE II - EN GARDE - ARMORED CORE 6 - DARKEST DUNGEON II - LETHAL COMPANY
BALDUR'S GATE 3**

Across the entire industry, around 9000 people lost their jobs in 2023. The media alone made up a relatively small percentage of that, but with so few notable destinations for news, guides, and everything in between, every loss is devastating. Even when playing the game correctly, places like The Washington Post's Launcher, Vice's Waypoint, and Inverse are happy to cut games media from their portfolios like chaff. This hasn't stopped in 2024, we're firmly over 5000 lost jobs industry wide by February, and we've already lost an upstart media vertical, The Messenger.

What can be said about this business that hasn't already been gut-wrenchingly shouted into the gluttonous maw of the hedge fund-dominated enshittification engine? Those of us who can still make a buck in this business do so mostly at the pleasure of people who couldn't care less about the thing we create, especially if it doesn't bring traffic and engagement. With more and more places shuttering, and smaller and smaller budgets, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for the industry to create a true "next generation" of games media writers. The job as it used to be is no more, and it's not looking great for what it could be.

There is one consistent refrain surrounding every round of media layoffs besides "why can they keep getting away with this?" and that's "we should start our own thing." Last year, I finally listened to that clarion call, and became one of the folks looking to do something else. LIFE BAR Quarterly is that something. It will be smaller and less immediate, but hopefully with some time and effort, it can find a place, an audience, and a community that is willing to be apart of something that can't just be devoured by the absolute worst parts of this business, and leave talented writers and creators stranded with nothing but lost time.

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IWSGWWGMBPWAPMTWLAINK

 by Emmett Watkins Jr.

"I want shorter games with worse graphics made by people who are paid more to work less and I'm Not Kidding" is a statement normally found attributed to Sonic the Hedgehog (Or Sylvester Stallone in Spy Kids 3D if you're nasty). It always sounded good to me, due to the aspirational effect this philosophy would have on developers. I'd gladly accept smaller-scale and less polished games if they do directly lead to better working conditions at the companies that make them. But this year, I realized that the first part of that statement is not just something I would gladly tolerate, but actively pine for.



2023 was a year of change for me. I got a new position at my job (which came with a much earlier schedule), as well as a new relationship this year. Thanks to all of this, I've had to spend less time playing games, which means I beat less than 10 games for the first time in many years. I had to rethink if games are even a feasible hobby to have anymore. Some of the games that did end up in my rotation, like Call of Duty and Fortnite, ask countless hours from me just to progress through the time-limited content. Many of my favorite AAA Studios and franchises have pivoted to 50-100 hour open worlds rather than 10-25 hour linear narratives, and some of those narratives even have hours of side content that balloon game length as well. It seems like every game nowadays is asking more from players like me than ever before.

So you might understand why I fell so deeply in love with En Garde a 3rd person fencer by new indie studio Fireplace Games. What started as a student project a few years back is now one of the best hidden gems of 2023. As a fencing game, its mechanics are not only smooth but heavily encourage improvisation. Every strike of the sword, the Sekiro-like parry, and the slight slow-motion dodge feels satisfying to pull off, as the game has enough challenge to make its combat engaging throughout its 3-4 hour campaign.

"I had to rethink if games are even a feasible hobby to have anymore"

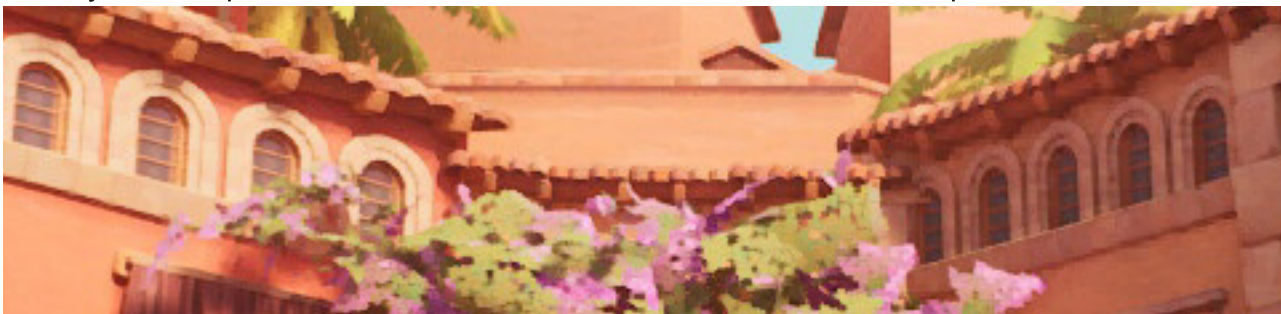
Plus, besides the sword, you can use your foot and the environment to toy with your foes. Every time a cannon was on the battlefield, I immediately looked for a lantern to ignite it and clear some enemies with a boom. Every bucket was an opportunity to blind an opponent for some free hits. Every staircase turned into a bowling alley for guards as I kicked them down into their friends. Best of all, any cauldron could be ignited to explode into the sky and, several minutes later, land on the head of a random enemy for an instant knockout. Moments like these allow for *En Garde* to be a celebration of cartoon violence, which is appropriate considering its tone aligns with a certain brand of animated feature in the vein of *The Road to El Dorado* so heavily.

That sort of adventure fiction of yesteryear like *The Princess Bride*, *Sinbad*, and *The Legend of Zorro* supply a lot of *En Garde*'s vibes. It blends humor and adventure, but is also an aesthetic that we don't quite get often in video games. This world of charming, over-the-top characters is all enhanced further by a vibrant, saturated color scheme and a lively Spanish soundtrack. But my favorite part of the entire

package is that it can be completed in a single sitting.

The polish and quality of this game are impressive considering this is Fireplace Games' first release. When talking about this game online and on podcasts, I kept comparing the game to the work of one of the biggest and best AAA studios, Insomniac Games, and specifically one of their least discussed games, *Ratchet and Clank: Into the Nexus*. It's not only one of my favorite entries in the *Ratchet and Clank* series but also one of my favorite games from the studio, period. It's way shorter than any of the mainline games, especially during the PS3 era, but it's not lacking in satisfying gameplay and pleasing visuals like its older brothers. The goofy tones, bright colors, and even the light platforming of *En Garde* brought me back to my time with this excellent little platform shooter.

The Golden Bolt's excellent video about *A Crack in Time* talks a bit about how Insomniac's early years were a mire of near-constant cycles of crunch. As the follow up it, the smaller scale of *Into the Nexus* was more of a necessity than a goal, something Insomniac likely has in common with Fireplace Games. But with



all of the studio closures and layoffs that have ravaged the games industry in the last year, it feels like games like these may become way more common. When the biggest AAA games, like Insomniac's own Spider-Man 2, cost hundreds of millions of dollars and five or more years to make, maybe more Miles Morales-sized games are the remedy to these ballooning budgets.

I may just be getting old, but as much as I do love so many modern games, I often wonder just how much games improved since the PS3 generation. Much of the format, gameplay, and even graphics of games are still just like they were back in 2010, we now just have better systems to run them and more pixels to see them. But while we wait for the next Inscryption and Alan Wake 2 to change the game, I would rather fill in the gaps with way more En Gardes than Elden Rings. Maybe I can just lean on more indie games now that my gaming time is more limited, but if the turbulence of the gaming industry is ever going to change for the better, perhaps En Garde is a small glimpse at what games may come as a result of that change.



El Vigilante

gilante! The most daring

